

CONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICITY OF CHIEFTAINCY AMONG THE NAWURI OF NORTHERN GHANA

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Abstract

Pre-colonial societies in Northern Ghana have been described as “centralized” and “acephalous.” While the Mole-Dagbani, Gonja and Wala states were said to be centralized, that is states with systems of government by which jurisdiction is territorial and based on chieftaincy with a paramount chief serving as the nexus of authority, the rest of the societies in Northern Ghana were described as acephalous – lacking territorial unity defined in administrative terms and by the notion of chieftaincy. Categorized as acephalous, the pre-colonial existence of chieftaincy in Nawuri society was dismissed. This paper argues that the description of Nawuri society as acephalous is inappropriate and inconsistent with available historical evidence about the ancient existence of chieftaincy among the Nawuri. Scholars must begin to construct the historicity of chieftaincy among the Nawuri in the context of a centralized, rather than an “acephalous” society.

Résumé

Les sociétés précoloniales du nord du Ghana ont été décrites comme étant centralisées ou acéphales. Alors que les groupes Mole-Dagbani, Gonja et Wala sont dits centralisés, dû au fait que leur juridiction est territoriale et que leurs systèmes gouvernementaux sont fondés sur une chefferie où un chef suprême siège en tant que liaison avec l'autorité ; le reste des sociétés du nord du Ghana ont été décrites comme acéphales, c'est-à-dire que leurs systèmes de gouvernement sont dépourvus de chefferie et d'une unité territoriale définie sur le plan administratif. Qualifiée d'acéphale, l'existence des chefferies dans la société Nawuri précoloniale a été rejetée. Cet article soutient qu'il est inadéquat de décrire la société Nawuri comme étant acéphale et qu'une telle description est incompatible avec les preuves

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historiques disponibles sur l'ancienne existence de chefferies chez les Nawuri. Les chercheurs doivent commencer à construire l'historicité de la chefferie chez les Nawuri dans le cadre d'une société centralisée, plutôt qu'acéphale.

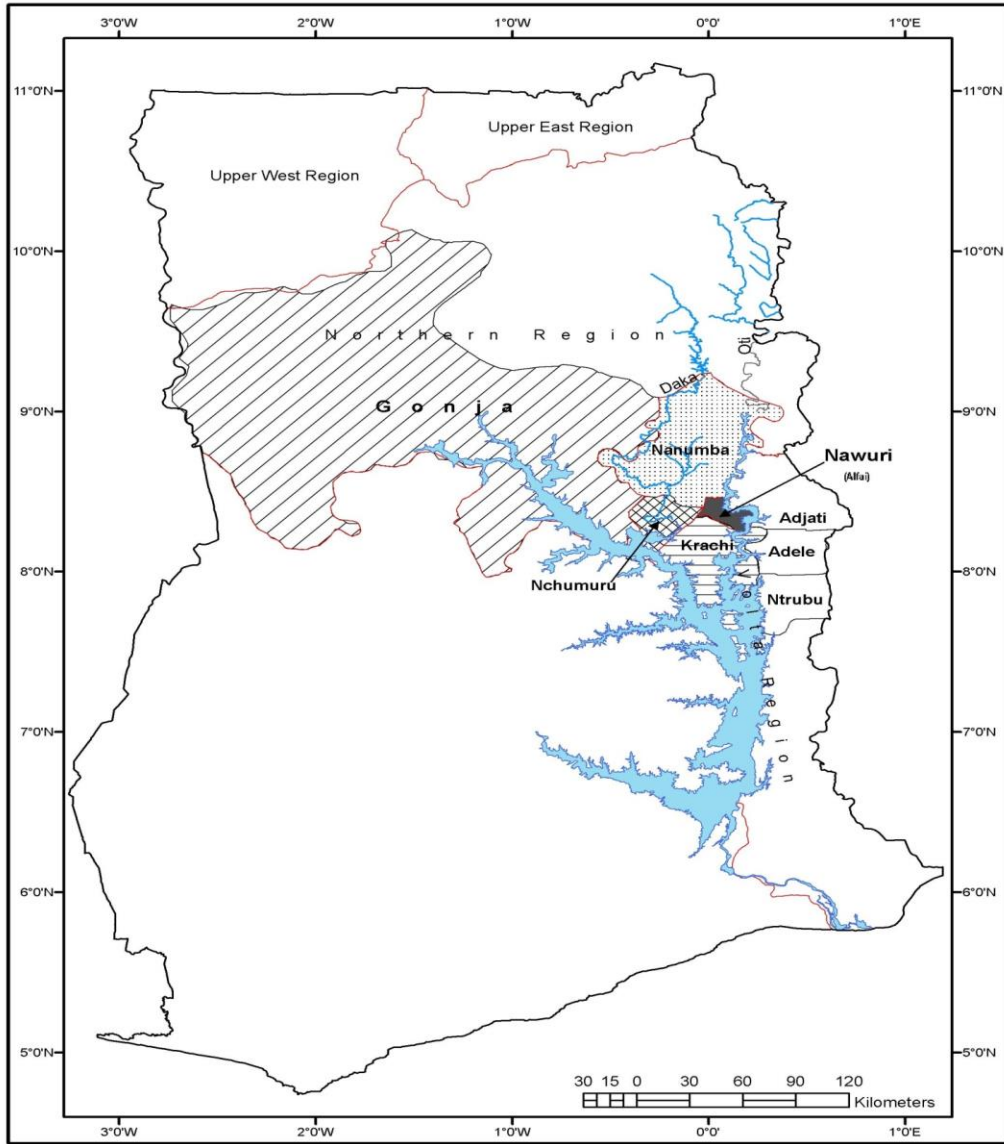
Introduction

As one of the autochthonous Guan cluster of ethnic groups in present-day Ghana, the Nawuri people trace their origin to the Afram Plains from where they migrated to Larteh Akuapem and sojourned with other Guan groups such as the Larteh, Anum, Nkonya, Krachi, Nchumuru, and Achode. In about the fourteenth century the Nawuri migrated from Larteh Akuapem and moving through Anum, Dwan (in present-day Brong Ahafo Region) and Otisu in Kete-Krachi territory; they crossed the Oti, settled and founded settlements in present-day Northern and Volta Regions. Some of the settlements founded by the Nawuri are Kpandai, Balai, Nkanchina, Bayim, Dodoai, Katiejeli, Buya, Kabonwule, Bladjai, Kitari, Awuratu, Suruku, Oprusai, and Njare.

Two main reasons have been adduced to explain the exodus of the Nawuri from Larteh-Akuapem. The traditions of origin of the Nawuri relate that they left Larteh-Akuapem because the mountainous area was unsuitable for their hunting, fishing and farming occupations. There was also a sense of insecurity generated by frequent dissensions in the fourteenth century, which caused a general exodus of some Guan-speaking peoples in search for new lands to settle.

In the seventeenth century, the Gonja arrived in Nawuriland, not as invaders, but as immigrants. The narratives of Gonja arrival in Nawuriland are varied and somewhat obscure. It is difficult to show by clear evidence how the Gonja arrived in Alfai. Nonetheless, both the Nawuri and the Gonja admit to the following:

Map of Ghana showing Nawuri (Alfai) Territory



Source: Lands Department, Accra, (n.d.)

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Namely that the former (the Nawuri) were the autochthones; that when the first Gonja immigrants arrived in Nawuriland, the Nawuri helped them to establish their farms and build their houses; that the early relations between the two ethnic groups were cordial as there were intermarriages and mutual collaborations among them; and that the two ethnic groups were political allies in the pre-colonial period.¹

In its report, the Ampiah Committee explained that the Nawuri

were an indigenous people in Alfai area who had complete autonomy and lived in friendly association with the Krachis and Nchumurus ... nowhere in the evidence had it been stated that the Nawuris were at any time conquered by the Gonjas. The evidence holds that the Nawuris and the Gonjas were allies and fought together during the Asante invasion of the Area ...the ...ethnic groups existed as a loose association since they met in the now Eastern Gonja Area for common purposes; fighting the common enemies like Asantes and others and protecting their lands.²

In about 1922, a small band of the Konkomba and the Bassari arrived in Alfai, and they were followed by waves of immigrants of different ethnicity. The Gonja were numerically a minority in Alfai, an ethnically heterogeneous area. In 1948, the population of the Gonja in Alfai stood at 436, while the demographic figures of the Nawuri, Bassari, Konkomba, Kotokoli, Dagomba, Nchumuru and Chakosi were 1195, 1863, 2281, 510, 232, 250 and 211, respectively.³

The 1970 census showed phenomenal increases in the demographic figures of some settlements in Alfai over those of 1948. For example, the population of Kpandai, Kabonwule and Kitare increased from 1718 to 1970, 309 to 784, and 211 to 991,

¹ Albert K. Awedoba, *An Ethnographic Study of Northern Ghanaian Conflicts; Towards A Sustainable Peace* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2009), 169; Cletus K. Mbowura, "Nawuri-Gonja Relations, 1913-1994" (University of Ghana, Legon: M.Phil thesis, 2002), 34-36.

² Justice Ampiah, *Report of Committee of Inquiry into the Gonjas, Nawuris and Nanjuro (Nchumuru) Dispute* (Accra: Government of Ghana, 1991), Part I, 61-62.

³ Public Records and Archival Division (hereafter PRAAD), Tamale, NRG 8/2/210 Nawuri and Nchumuru under United Nations trusteeship: A letter from the Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories to the Secretary, Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, dated February 1, 1951.

respectively. The only exception was Bladjai, which reduced in population size from 843 in 1948 to 618 in 1970⁴ due largely to emigrations of Konkomba settlers as tracts of their farmlands were inundated following the damming of the Volta River at Akosombo. In 1984, the number of inhabitants in Kpandai, the capital of Alfai, stood at 5252⁵ of which only 700 were Gonja. The rest of the inhabitants were primarily Nawuri.⁶

First administered as part of German Togoland from 1899 to 1914, Nawuriland, also known in records as “Alfai” and “Kanankulai”, came under British administration in 1919 when German Togoland was dismembered after World War One and administered by France and Britain as Mandated Territories of the League of Nations. To effectively administer the Northern Territories (now comprising Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions), the British colonial authorities introduced the policy of indirect rule in 1932. The policy was preceded by Rattray’s anthropological study of 1927. Describing the area and its peoples as the “Tribes of Ashanti Hinterland”, Rattray explained the social and political structures of the peoples. He argued that it was possible to regard the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast as a more or less “homogeneous cultural and – to a lesser extent – linguistic area, rather than a mosaic comprising of a welter of tongues and divergent customs.”⁷ As part of the introduction of indirect rule, the administrative and traditional boundaries in the Northern Territories were re-drawn. Traditional boundaries were redefined to make them coterminous with, and tangential to, administrative boundaries of districts. The number of districts was reduced from eleven to six to ensure that their boundaries coincided with those of the Native Authority Areas. The six districts were Mamprusi, Dagomba, Gonja, Wala, Lawra-Tumu and Krachi Districts.⁸ It was hoped that the

⁴ T.E. Aitol, *Ghana Population Atlas* (Accra: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd).

⁵ Population Census of Ghana, 1984 (Ghana Statistical Service, 1984).

⁶ Justice Ampiah, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Gonjas, Nawuris and Nanjuro Dispute* (Accra: Gov. of Ghana, 1991), part II, 215.

⁷ R.S. Rattray, *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1.

⁸ The Mamprusi District consisted of the Mamprusi state, and the Kasena-Nankani, the Builsa and the Kusasi areas. Dagomba District was made up of the Dagomba state, the Nanumba state, as well as the lands of the Konkomba and the Chakosi. The Gonja District consisted of the Gonja kingdom and the lands of the Nawuri and the Nchumuru. Wala District was made up of Wala, Sisala, Lobi and Dagarba areas while the Lawra-Tumu District was made up of the areas of Lawra (much of which was Sisala), Nandom, Jirapa, Lambussie and Tumu. The

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redefining of the districts would remove the obstacle to the development of local government which the imposition of artificial international boundaries presented.⁹ The tiny states in the Northern Section of British Togoland were subsumed under the bigger ones. The report on British Togoland for 1932 showed that the Northern Section of British Togoland was reorganized as follows:

Mamprusi – all the land lying within the Northern section subject to the Na of Mamprusi and occupied by the Kusasi, B'mowba and Konkomba tribes. Dagomba – all tribal lands lying within the northern section: subject to the Na of Dagomba; or Belonging to the Konkomba and Chakosi tribes; or Subject to the Na of Nanumba. Gonja – all the tribal lands lying within the northern section: belonging to the Owura of Nchumuru; or belonging to the Nawuri tribe and subject to the chief of Kpandai. Krachi – all lands within the northern section and subject to the Head chiefs of Kete-Krachi, Adele and Adjuati (Achode).¹⁰

In re-drawing the administrative boundaries of the Northern Territories for the effective implementation of indirect rule, the colonial administrators amalgamated the so-called tiny societies with the bigger ones for the purpose of eliminating the problem of plurality of traditional states. The essence of the amalgamation policy was to rationalize existing social and political structures for administrative purposes. It aimed at maintaining the paramount chiefs of the Mole-Dagbani and the Gonja and absorbing the small communities scattered about under them. The objective was to ensure that the Mole-Dagbani and Gonja states should become strong native states, each with its own system of government of the European model.¹¹ The result was that:

numerous and unassimilated groups such as the Nawuri, Nchumuru, Mo and Vagla, were grouped under the Gonja chiefs; large number of Konkomba and Chakosi were made subject to the Dagomba kingdom; the Frafra and

Krachi District was made up of the Krachi, the Adele and the Achode areas. For details see, NRG8/3/53, Report on the Northern Territories for the Year 1935-1936; Report on the Northern Territories for the Year 1936/1937 (Balme Library, University of Ghana).

⁹ NRG8/3/53 Report of the Northern Territories for the Year 1935-1936, 7.

¹⁰ Colonial Report on British Togoland for the year ended 1932, 6-7.

¹¹ PRAAD ADM 56/1/258 The Occupation of Yendi: "Minutes of Conference at Tamale, March 11th, 1921", 1-3.

B'Moba to the paramount chief of Mamprusi; and the Dagarti and Sisala in the Wala District to the Wala chiefs.¹²

The result was that the traditional boundaries of tiny states such as Nawuri, Nchumuru, Kusasi, Chakosi and Konkomba (actually a large group in comparison with some of the states) were obliterated as they became an integral part of the traditional boundaries of the bigger ones under which they were now subsumed.

In their book, *African Political Systems*, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard categorized the political systems in Africa into two – states with centralized authority and the uncentralized ones whose features of government are defined in local lineage rather than administrative terms.¹³ Applying the categorizations of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard to societies in Northern Ghana, most scholars used the idioms *centralized* and *acephalous* or *uncentralized* as the broad reference terms of the political systems of the states in the Northern Territories. The general impression was that the only centralized states in Northern Ghana were those of Mamprugu, Dagbon, Gonja, Nanum and Wala. Chieftaincy, an institution whose existence was traced to the fifteenth century, was identified as the basis of government of these states. These states were said to have effective political organization based on territorial and secular leadership with the paramount chief as the ultimate authority. Rattray asserts that the political system of the centralized states was superimposed upon the autochthones, and that the centralized states introduced chieftaincy in Northern Ghana, and replaced the office of the *Tindana* (the Earth priest) with that of a secular leader (chief).¹⁴

On the other hand, scholars label the political systems of the indigenes, largely Gur-speaking, as acephalous. Some common kinship, political and ritual features were identified of them. These societies were said to have lacked centralized authority and administrative machinery of European conception. In the words of Brukum, the acephalous states “had no polity and no territorial units defined by administrative systems. The lineage took the place of political allegiance and many lineages formed a

¹² P.A. Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: the Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana* (London: Longman, 1979), 43.

¹³ Fortes, M. and Evans-Pritchard, E.E, *African Political Systems* (Oxford University Press, 1940).

¹⁴ Rattray, xii.

clan.”¹⁵ The *Tindana* became the nexus of political authority, wielding both religious and political authority. He was the owner of the *Tenge* (the earth goddess), and thus the custodian of the land and “the principal mediator between the people, the *Tenge* and the ancestral spirits” of his area.¹⁶ In a sense, the *Tindana* had spiritual control over his people from which fact a political authority based on religious aura was wielded. As said earlier, “most writers on the history of Northern Ghana have always asserted that the only centralized states were those of Mamprugu, Dagbon, Gonja, Nanum and Wala.”¹⁷ The impression, as scholars such as Goody, Hawkins, Der, Brukum suggest, is that some ethnic groups in present-day Northern Ghana, such as Konkomba, Chakosi, Lobi, Dagaaba, Sisala, Frafra, Mo, Kusasi, Kasena, Nabdum, Tallensi, Tampluma, Mo, Nawuri, among others, were acephalous or that chieftaincy in these societies was introduced more recently by immigrants from the ruling dynasties of the centralized states.¹⁸

Another prevailing impression in the historiography on Northern Ghana is that chieftaincy as an established institution was non-existent in the tiny societies before their amalgamation in 1932. In other words, there were no traces of the existence of chieftaincy among the autochthones before the imposition of colonial rule. This became the prevailing notion among the ruling houses of the Mole-Dagbani and Gonja states when the amalgamated ethnicities began to resist the new political arrangement in the 1950s. A further impression was created to the effect that chieftaincy in Northern Ghana, with the exception of the chieftaincy institutions of the

¹⁵ N.J.K. Brukum, *The Guinea Fowl, Mango and Pito Wars: Episodes in the History of Northern Ghana, 1980-1999* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ N.J.K. Brukum, *The Northern Territories of the Gold Coast under British Colonial Rule, 1897-1956: A Study in Political Change* (University of Toronto: PhD Thesis, 1996), 29.

¹⁸ J. Goody, *The political Systems of the Tallensi and their Neighbours 1888-1915. Cambridge Anthropology* 14, 1-25, quoted in C. Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2007), 1-2; Sean Hawkins, *Disguising Chiefs and God as History: Questions on the Acephalousness of LoDagaa Politics and Religion, Africa* 66, 207-247, quoted in Lentz, 2; Benedict Der, *The Stateless Peoples of North-West Ghana: a Reappraisal of the Case of the Dagara of Nandom*. Unpubl. manuscript, University of Cape Coast, Department of History, quoted in Lentz, 2; N.J.K. Brukum, *The Northern Territories of the Gold Coast under British Colonial Rule, 1897-1956: A Study in Political Change* (University of Toronto: PhD Thesis, 1996),

Mole-Dagbani and Gonja states, was a late colonial or postcolonial development. This notion has given rise to terminologies such as *Major* and *Minor* used as epithets of the ethnicities of the Northern Region of Ghana. These terms have nothing to do with demography; but are used derogatorily to denote respectively states that built large empires in the past and groups that did not.¹⁹ This categorization has wider implications – that the majority were those that were centralized and had chieftaincy structures; and that allodial rights in lands in the region resided in them. While the Gonja, Mamprusi, Dagomba and Nanumba were tagged “major”, the rest of the ethnic groups in the Northern Region of Ghana were described as “minor”.

The view that the tiny states affected by the amalgamation policy were hitherto acephalous is however simplistic. In 1982 Tuurey drew attention to the fact that some tiny centralized states such as the Manlarla of Kaleo and Wichau based at Dorimon existed in Northern Ghana in the pre-colonial period though they did not form empires as large as those of the Mole-Dagbani and Gonja.²⁰ Jones also argues that the Guan-speakers were the most politically advanced populations that the Gonja immigrants met with in Northern Ghana, giving the indication that the Nawuri and the Nchumuru in the Kpembe division had the conception of chieftaincy before their encounter with the Gonja.²¹

In 1991 and 1992, communal violence broke out between Nawuri and Gonja over allodial claims to Alfai, though the controversy over the historicity of chieftaincy institution among the Nawuri also played a major role. Indeed, after war broke out between the Nawuri and the Gonja in 1991, the Kanankulaiwura rejected radio appeals for a mediation meeting between the factions, claiming that reference to Nawuri leaders as chiefs was unacceptable and inappropriate. He spoke as follows:

... you are no doubt aware that as the Kanankulaiwura, I am the direct representative of the Kpembewura who is the divisional chief of Kpembe

¹⁹ Brukum, *The Guinea Fowl*, 1.

²⁰ Tuurey, G., *An Introduction to the Mole-Speaking Community* (Wa Catholic Press, 1982) quoted in N.J.K. Brukum, “The Northern Territories of the Gold Coast under British Colonial Rule, 1897-1956: A Study in Political Change” (Department of History, University of Toronto, 1996), 29.

²¹ D.H. Jones, “Jakpa and the Foundation of Gonja”. In *Transactions of Historical Society of Ghana* (1962), Vol. VI, 1-28.

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including Alfai area. In the Alfai area, I am the direct representative of the Kpembewura who is the divisional chief of Kpembe including Alfai area. In the Alfai area, I am assisted by Dusaiwura, Bladjaiwura, Njawrewura and the Chowura. Apart from these chiefs mentioned, there are no other chiefs in the Alfai area. Your Excellency, I am making this point because in your radio announcement inviting us to this meeting you mentioned Nawuri names with titles 'Nana'... I want to make it clear at this initial stage that throughout the Gonja Traditional Council area no chief bears the title 'Nana.'²²

The Concept of Chief

By the 1950s Nawuri resistance of Gonja rule had reached a crescendo, and triggered a debate about the legitimacy of Gonja rule in Nawuriland as the Nawuri agitated for a return to the political status quo in which political authority in Nawuriland was vested in their chiefs, as it was before 1932. They claimed that the centralized nature of their society with political authority vested in secular leaders or chiefs was ancient. Using the British rationalization of social and political structures as an armory, the Gonja, however, challenged Nawuri argument, claiming that Nawuri society was acephalous in the pre-colonial era.

It is not certain when chieftaincy, as understood by the British from their experience in Southern Ghana or the centralized states in the Northern Territories, developed among the Nawuri. What is known is that the Nawuri and other Guan-speakers were the most politically advanced populations that the Gonja immigrants met with in Northern Ghana.²³ The Nawuri maintain that chieftaincy was an ancient political institution among them, while the Gonja maintain that its evolution is recent. The Gonja indeed maintain that the Nawuri have been their subjects in the pre-colonial period and that chieftaincy among them developed in the 1950s.²⁴ As the officially designated overlords of the Nawuri since 1932, the Gonja refused to recognize Nawuri political leaders as chiefs.

²² Ampiah, *op.cit.*, 6.

²³ Jones, 1-28.

²⁴ Ampiah, part II, 18-25.

The question about the historicity of Nawuri chieftaincy institutions was first raised in 1951. In that year, the Nawuri enstooled Nana Atorsah as the Nawuriwura amidst opposition from the Gonja. Yabumwura Ewuntoma questioned the legitimacy of Nana Atorsah's enstoolment, claiming it had no historical precedence.²⁵ Dixon supported the Yabumwura's view. He maintained that the "claim of 'Nana Atorsah Agyeman I' to the 'paramountcy' of Alfai (Nawuriland) was spurious and not based on traditional precedent."²⁶ Dixon's view is untenable as available evidence shows that Nana Atorsah had predecessors. The genealogy of *Nawuriwura* (paramount chief of the Nawuri) shows the existence of the office of the Nawuriwura since ancient times, and that it had served as the focus of central authority in Nawuriland. The list below attests to the fact that chieftaincy or at least the existence of the institution of Nawuriwura was ancient:

Nana Krunkpaw: Nawuriwura who led the Nawuri from Larteh to Nawuri Kupo.

Nana Attara: Nawuriwura who led the Nawuri from Nawuri Kupo to Kitare. He was also the founder for the walled town of Kitare.

Nana Abisa: Nawuriwura during whose reign slave raiding was conducted in Nawuriland by the Asante and the Dagomba.

Nana Bresiam Okore: said to be the bravest Nawuriwura.

Nana Akonshi: Nawuriwura, who was said to have helped the Gonja against the Asante in the latter's invasion of Eastern Gonja in 1744-5.

Nana Elu: Nawuriwura when the Germans arrived in Nawuriland in the 1880s.

Nana Dari: Nawuriwura, who fought on behalf of the Lepo against the Kanyasiwura in 1894.

Nana Boila: Nawuriwura at the time Mahama Karatu Kankaranfu was installed as the Kanankulaiwura in 1913.

²⁵ A letter from Yagbubumwura Wuntoma to Nawuri Elders, dated 26 October 1951.

²⁶ J. Dixon, *Report of J. Dixon, Administrative Officer Class I, on the Representations made to the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations Organization Concerning the Status of the Nawuris and Nanjuros within the Togoland Area of Gonja District* (Accra: Gold Coast Government, 1955), 33.

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Nana Bunyaluwei: The Nawuriwura, who was allegedly poisoned to death at Kpembe and Nawuri chiefly regalia taken by the Gonja.

Nana Lowugyayin: The Nawuriwura at the time Nawuri seceded to the neighbouring areas of Krachi and Nanumba in 1943. He was destooled for old age and was replaced by Nana Atorsah in 1951.²⁷

The conclusions drawn from this quotation are that chieftaincy among the Nawuri is ancient; and that it existed among them before they migrated from Larteh-Akuapem to their present settlements in the Northern and Upper Regions in the fourteenth century. Indeed, the office of the Nawuriwura existed alongside the chiefly offices in the various Nawuri settlements since ancient times.²⁸ Usually, the suffix *wura* is added to the name of settlement to form the title of a chief of a Nawuri settlement as in *Kpandaiwura*, *Balaiwura*, *Nkanchinawura*, *Katiejeliwura*, *Jadigbewura*, *Kabowura*, *Bladjaiwura* and *Kitarewura*. The etymology of the suffix *wura* is significant. In the Nawuri language, as in Gonja and other Guan languages, it means “master”, “boss” or “lord”. Hence a chief in Nawuri is regarded as an overlord or master of his settlement.

The regalia and paraphernalia used by Nawuri chiefs suggest that the Nawuri chieftaincy institution has no northern origin. In Gonja and among the Mole-Dagbani peoples, chiefs are enskined and have the Skin as the symbol of authority. The chiefly classes are also enrobed in smocks over loose trousers or pantaloons and wear a cap. By contrast, Nawuri chiefs are enstooled, and use the Stool as a symbol of their political authority. They also wear cloth and a crown.²⁹ As Ampiah puts it:

... evidence shows that the Gonja Ruling Class, as was established by the Gonja history, were mostly Moslems; they wear balloon trousers and smocks, with a towel on the shoulder, (that is the Chiefs). Their symbols of Chiefly power and authority are the Skins and Horses. The Nawuris and Nchumurus [do not] have these characteristics and culture. (a) they use black

²⁷ Mbowura, 55.

²⁸ Ampiah, part I, 56.

²⁹ Cliff S. Maasole, *The Konkomba and their Neighbours from the Pre-European Period to 1914: A Study in Inter-Ethnic Relations in Northern Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2006), 56.

stools as symbols of their Chiefly power. (b) They sit on Chairs whilst the Gonjas sit cross-legged on Skins.³⁰

In short, these differences do not only provide clues to the northern and southern origins of the chieftaincy institutions of the Gonja and the Nawuri respectively and those of other ethnic groups in Northern Ghana; they also show that the chieftaincy institution of the Nawuri was not borrowed from their northern counterparts. If the supposition that chieftaincy in Northern Ghana was introduced by Mole-Dagbani and the Gonja invaders is true, then the ingrained characteristics of chieftaincy in the region would have necessarily been reflected in the cultural traits of Nawuri chieftaincy. The implication is that the chieftaincy institution of the Nawuri pre-dated their migration from Larteh-Akuapem in southern Ghana to their present settlements in Northern Ghana in the fourteenth century. Having arrived in Nawuriland with an 'imported' southern form of chieftaincy, it can be concluded that the Nawuri established a centralized society with chiefs as a nexus of political authority long before the arrival of the Gonja and the Mole-Dagbani with their brand of chieftaincy in the fifteenth century.

Though Nawuri societies had chiefs before the colonial era, it is important to note that colonial interests, rather than 'customary' legitimacy and history determined whether the colonial authorities recognized one political leader and not the other. For instance, in Southern Ghana, "kings" like Nana Amoako Atta I (1867-1887), whose dynasty had a history going back to at least 1630s, was refused formal Government recognition for his jurisdiction till 1899 simply because the British found him hostile to their interests.³¹ So, the fact that the British, and subsequently the Gonja, did not recognize Nawuri chieftaincy does not prove that the institution was unknown among Nawuri until the twentieth century. It is also worthy of note that following the enactment of the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance (NJO, 1883), the legitimacy of "chief" ceased to be inherent in ancient custom and the will of the ancestors but rather in the caprice of the Governor. As far back as 1903, the colonial Government hinted at

³⁰ Ampiah, part I, 61.

³¹ For the hostility of King Amoako Atta I to British interest, see Robert Addo-Fening, *Akyem Abuakwa, 1700-1943: From Ofori Panin to Sir Ofori Atta* (Trondheim: Department of History, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 1997), 66-85.

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supporting rulers who had it in their power to assist the Government in the carrying out of its national interests.³² To this end, the power of the major chieftaincies of Gonja, Mamprusi, Dagomba and Wala was consolidated and supported.

In addition, the colonial authorities in Northern Ghana invested in ordinary people with chiefly power for the sake of administrative expediency and without recourse to custom.³³ In Taleland, for example, the colonial government appointed chiefs without recourse to the custom of the people. Iliasu describes them as:

... mere sergeant-majors through whom the administration addressed the rank and file. Most of them had not the slightest claims to authority under the traditional political system; their authority rested solely on the threats of retaliation by the administration if their peoples showed any disinclination to obey them.³⁴

At the same time, the colonial Government “installed a Mamprusi chief, the Kunab, chief of the Kurugu Division of Mamprusi, to act as head chief of the Tallensi, in an effort to overcome the administrative problems raised by the segmentary nature of Tallensi political organization.”³⁵ Similarly, in Igboland, the colonial regime appointed chiefs by issuing them with warrants to exercise authority that they had never exercised before. Known as “Warrant-chiefs, they were given unrestrained authority and control over courts, and were “seen by their people as miniature tyrants.”³⁶ It was this spirit of administrative expediency that influenced the Germans to recognize Mahama Karatu, a Gonja immigrant, as the Kanankulaiwura (head-chief

³² Ladouceur, 41.

³³ A.A. Iliasu, “The Establishment of British Administration in Mamprugu, 1898-1937”. *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, Vol. XVI, 1975, 1-28; In the 1920s, there were indications that the colonial government appointed chiefs in the Kete-Krachi District, which included Alfai. This is deduced from a report which stated that the Government could appoint a chief, but the appointed chiefs were in reality recognized as the *Tindana* with powers to allocate land, though the subjects might verbally acquiesce. See PRAAD (Accra) ADM 56/1/3375 Land Tenure: “Answers to Questionnaire to Chief Commissioner Northern Territories”, 44-45.

³⁴ Iliasu, 1-28..

³⁵ Ladouceur, 43.

³⁶ J.B. Webster and A.A. Boahen, *The Revolutionary Years: West Africa Since 1800* (London: Longman, 1967), 206.

of the Gonja in Nawuriland) in 1913 and to vest him with sovereign authority over the entire Nawuriland. A document of his investiture reads:

with the authority of Kaiserlichen station Kete-Krachi, the Native Mahama-Kratu of Kpandai **is today to become Head Chief** (of Nawuriland) ... These villages are placed under him: (1) Kpandai, (2) Katiageli, (3) Balae, (4) Beyim, (5) Nkantschena, (6)Dodope, (7) Kabuwele, (8) Kotiko, (9) Abrionko, (10) Suruku [emphasis mine].³⁷

In the estimation of the Germans, the Nawuri and their chiefs were unenlightened as they considered them primitive, poor and unintelligent.³⁸ By contrast, they considered Mahama Karatu who was literate in Arabic as enlightened and experienced due to his numerous travels as a trader.³⁹ In the light of these examples, the Gonja claim that the Nawuri had no political leadership can only mean that their rulers did not receive the colonial stamp of approval.

Proof of Chieftaincy in Nawuri before Amalgamation

The history of the application of the term “chief” in the Gold Coast makes the Gonja claim that the Nawuri were an uncentralized polity untenable. Historically, the term was applied in the northern part of the Gold Coast by the British from their experience and encounters with political leaders in the south. Up to 1900, small Akan towns and villages in Southern Ghana were known as “Oman” (polity) without distinction and their leaders as “ohene”/”odikro” (ruler).⁴⁰ Several of these “aman” formed themselves into a bigger “oman” (state) headed by a supreme ruler known as

³⁷ Dixon., 8; J.A. Braimah and J.R. Goody, *Salaga: the Struggle for Power* (London: Longman, 1967), 70

³⁸ PRAAD (Accra) ADM 11/1/1621 Extract from Report of Enquiry on the Sphere of British Occupation of Togoland, 18-19.

³⁹ J.A. Braimah and J.R. Goody, 70.

⁴⁰ J.E. Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (Frank Cass & Co, 1903), 19. Quoted in R. Addo-Fening, “The Relevance of Traditional Governance” in Baffour Agyeman-Duah ed., *Ghana: Governance in the Fourth Republic* (Accra, Ghana Centre for Democratic Development [CDD], 2008), 32-56.

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“Omanhene” (state ruler). In Casely Hayford’s words, the traditional state was a highly decentralized one as it was an aggregation of villages and towns

... federated together under the same laws, the same customs, the same faith and worship ... speaking the same language and owing (sic) allegiance to a paramount King or president who represented the sovereignty of the entire nation.⁴¹

It was after the enactment of NJO 1883 that rulers were categorized into sub-chiefs, chiefs and paramount chiefs. Indeed, between the 1880s and 1900, the British simultaneously used the terms “king” and “chief” to refer to rulers of all kinds in Northern Ghana. For example, rulers such as those of Kpembe (Salaga) and Daboya (both divisions of the Gonja kingdom), Ya-Na, Nayiri and the Yabumwura of the Gonja continued to be referred to as “kings”, while in other cases the titles “king”, “chief” and “headmen” were used to refer to different categories of traditional political rulers in Northern Ghana.⁴² The terminology “chief” only fully came into vogue in the North approximately after 1900. It was the subsequent British encounter with the ethnicities in Northern Ghana after 1900 that initiated the application of the term “chief” to traditional political leaders. With their experience in Southern Ghana, the British were quick to describe the bigger states in Northern Ghana as centralized and their political leaders as chiefs. On the contrary, all the smaller states were labelled as uncentralized and the terms “priests” and “clan heads”, rather than “chief”, were applied to their political leaders. Whether it was appropriate to describe all the smaller states as uncentralized or not, it is important to note that in all uncentralized states, as in both southern and northern Ghana, allegiance to a shrine, a common territory and a common culture and language were the reference points of identity and

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Johnson Marion (compiler), *Salaga Papers*, Legon, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Acc. Nos. SAL/86/1; SAL/43/1; Kwame Arhin, *The Papers of Ekem Ferguson: A Fanti Official of the Government of the Gold Coast* (Leiden/Cambridge, African Studies Centre, 1974); “Treaty with Nadawle, 11 January, 1898” in G.E. Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana History* (London, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd. on Behalf of University of Ghana, 1964), 502-503. The preamble of the treaty reads: “the **King, Chiefs and Principal Headmen** of Nadawle, having declared that they have not made any treaty with any other Power, do hereby voluntarily place their country under the protection of Great Britain (emphasis mine).

political unity. The priests wielded religious authority that was fused with political authority. They were the final authority in matters that went beyond purely clan interests. Inappropriately, however, the British colonial authorities did not regard them as chiefs. It is important to note that, unlike Europe where religious wars and conflict eventually led to the separation of 'religion' (church) and 'state', in traditional states of Africa the two were inseparably linked, as was the case in the Papal state of Rome.

In their argument that Nawuri society was acephalous, the Gonja maintained that historically and culturally, the leaders of Nawuri societies were *ablisaa* (clan heads) appointed since ancient times by the Kanankulaiwura. However, since the office of Kanankulaiwura did not itself date back to ancient times, this begs the question of who were appointing clan heads prior to the Gonja arrival. The Gonja also claim that *ablisaa*, who rendered good services were elevated to the rank of *Mbowura* (War Captain) and stools were created for them. The Gonja further maintain that it was Kanankulaiwura Mahama Karatu who created stools for Boila of Kpandai, Awiagah of Jadigbe and Asafu of Nkanchina.⁴³ The Gonja view is untenable. The Gonja, as Muslims, did not use stools as part of the symbolism of their chiefly institution. If the Gonja claim that the *Mbowura* were appendages of the Kanankulaiwura was true, one would expect them to have created sub-skins rather than sub-stools for them. It is culturally inconceivable for a Gonja chief who sits on a skin to have created stools for his Nawuri subject chiefs or captains. It was in the light of the cultural illogicality of the Gonja position that Dixon maintained that there was the possibility that each Nawuri headman had his own family stool, though he did not rule out the probability of the Gonja creating War Captain Stools for some special reason for the Nawuri headmen of Kpandai, Jadigbe and Nkanchina.⁴⁴

In some of their petitions, the Nawuri referred to their society as a "stateless" one. For example, in one of their petitions, they stated that:

... from time immemorial, Nawuri society had been an acephalous (sic) society (i.e. without chiefs) but had political organization with power in the hands of clan heads. The few Gonjas who came to settle at Kpandai started practicing chieftaincy as known in Gonjaland and with time the few Gonjas attempted to extend and superimpose their system of administration on the

⁴³ Dixon, 11. *Ablisaa* (singular *eblisaa*) is a Nawuri word which means elders.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

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Nawuris but we have always resisted it. Owing to early formal education received by many Gonjas, their sons and daughters have monopolized high government appointments in the Northern Region, and thereby actively supported the Gonja chiefs to cross to Kpandai to prop up the chiefly inclination of a few Gonjas there with the view to extending Gonja hegemony throughout Nawuriland.⁴⁵

Nawuri usage of the term “acephalous” to describe their society was simply in conformity with the contemporary lexicon. They were merely using an expression that had become part of colonial idiom, for want of a better term. Available records show that the Nawuri were historically a centralized polity and that at the time of the European encounter they had chiefs, who served as locus of political authority. A 1926 colonial report stated:

... there are five divisions or tribal areas [in Krachi district]: Krachi, Nawuri, Chumuru, Adjuati and Adele. Each is governed by its own Head Chief and Sub-chiefs who are assisted by counselors. These chiefs are not elected but are appointed, from among other chiefs by a system of rota. Such chiefs are all of one family in each division. Their titles differ: Krachi is governed by Omanhin. **Nawuri is governed by Wurubon (Wurabu)**, Adjuati is governed by Asasewura, Nchumuru is governed by Owure and Adele is governed by Ejudele (emphasis mine).⁴⁶

In the same year, another report lent credence to the fact that chiefly offices existed among the Nawuri. The report reads:

... the aim of the colonial Administration which was continued by the Gonjas over the Nawuris was not to repair the damage of the past but by continuing to treat the NAWURIS as serfs, **refusing to recognize their chiefs** ... [emphasis mine].⁴⁷

The reports referred to above leave no doubt that chiefly offices existed among the Nawuri prior to the amalgamation of 1932, though the Gonja refused to recognize them. The non-recognition of Nawuri chiefs was an attempt by the Gonja to deny Nawuri a separate political identity and to justify their incorporation into the Gonja state. Writing to the Acting Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories in

⁴⁵ Petition of Nawuris to the Chairman, PNDC, dated 2 April, 1991.

⁴⁶ Annual Report of British Sphere of Togoland for the year ended 1926, 10.

⁴⁷ Dixon, 19.

August 1927 about the award of medallions to chiefs in Krachi, Kpandai, Siari, Tutukpene and Nanjuro, the Provincial Commissioner for Southern Province stated:

... no medallions have been issued to the **Krachi District**. The Acting District Commissioner suggests, and I recommend that the following chiefs be given medallions. Omanhene – Krachi – 4 inches, Wurobon – Kpandai – 3 inches, Osuriwura – Siari – 2 inches, Eju Dele – Tutukpene – 2 inches, Owure – Nenjero – 2 inches (emphasis mine).⁴⁸

If the Nawuri did not have chiefs would the colonial government have considered the *Wurabon* for a medallion meant for paramount chiefs? The Gonja have tried to belittle the award of the medallion to the paramount chief of the Nawuri, claiming it was given for meritorious services in respect of roadwork. It is naive to make such a claim for it suggests that all the chiefs listed including the Krachiwura received their medallions not in recognition of their status as chiefs but for their meritorious services in respect of roadwork.⁴⁹

The legitimacy of Nawuri chieftaincy was a function not so much of history as of official recognition based on the exigencies of indirect rule. Indirect rule turned the relations between the Nawuri and the Gonja into those of “ruled” and “ruler”, and recognized the Gonja chiefs and their traditional structure as the official locus of political authority in Alfai. On the contrary, Nawuri chiefs and their traditional structure were not recognized. From the introduction of indirect rule in the Northern Territories in 1932, the Nawuri people had persistently petitioned the colonial authorities to recognize their chiefs in the expectation that the Gonja would take a cue from that and do the same; but the government failed to do so. It was the government’s failure to heed to the petition of Nawuri chiefs that encouraged Gonja intransigence.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ PRAAD (Accra) ADM 56/1/234 Letter from the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province to the Acting Chief Commissioner dated 17th August 1925. Accordingly, a three-inch medallion, number 61, was awarded to the Nawuriwura. It is not quite clear whether the medallion given to the Nawuri paramount chief (Wurubon) was awarded to him on the date stated above or later, since the date of award stated in the document preceded the request by the Commissioner of Southern Province to award him and three of his colleagues medallions.

⁴⁹ Dixon, 9.

⁵⁰ PRAAD (Tamale) NRG 8/2/210 Nawuri and Nanjuro under United Nations Trusteeship: Letter from Nawuri Elders to the District Commissioner for Salaga, dated October 14, 1951.

Impact Analysis

It is unclear whether the colonial authorities would have constituted Alfai into a separate traditional authority if they had knowledge of the existence of centralized governance structures among the Nawuri. It was, however, possible that they would not have acted hastily by subsuming the Nawuri under the Gonja if they had knowledge of the existence of such centralized governance structures among the Nawuri. This was evidenced by the caution of the British Commissioner for the Northern-Eastern Province against hasty subordination of some chiefs to others. It reads:

we must go very slowly indeed with regard to the paramountcy of the various chiefs, the relations of their sub-chiefs to each other, and also of the people to their various chiefs. It is useless to blind our eyes to this fact and to put down on paper that one chief is paramount to another ... unless carefully watched the present scheme may really be a fruitful source of discord and tend to divide the people into even worse cliques than at present, instead of being a useful method of consolidating the various clans.⁵¹

The document reads, in part: “we the undersigned, Elders of the Nawuri Land having gathered on Sunday, at Katiejeli, to elect our Chief for the proper administration of our Land (Nawuri), have this day elected, by popular election of the Nawuris, our accredited and popularly elected CHIEF for all the Nawuri Land, LUDJAI NAWURI. The said LUDJAI NAWURI, owing to old age has relegated his election as Chief of the Nawuris to the next popularly accepted CANDIDATE, ATORSA NAWURI. Therefoer (sic), by popular consent CHIEF ATORSA NAWURI has been elected CHIEF OF THE NAWURI LAND this 14th day of October, 1951, taking the place of LUDJAI NAWURI ... Therefore, it has been agreed upon by the populace that Sunday, the 28th of October 1951, shall be the day of stalling CHIEF ATORSA AS THE CHIEF OF THE NAWURIS.” On other occasions, the Nawuri expressed dismay about the refusal of the Government to recognize Nana Atorsah. PRAAD (Tamale) NRG 8/2/210 Nawuri and Nanjuro under United Nations Trusteeship: Petition of Elders of Nawuri Land to the District Commissioner for Salaga, dated November 1, 1951; Petition of Elders of Nawuri Land to the District Commissioner for Salaga, dated November 3, 1951; Petition of Elders of Nawuri Land to the District Commissioner for Salaga, dated November 5, 1951. All the petitions were copied to the Minister of Local Government.

⁵¹ Cited in Ampiah, part I, 19.

It was also possible that the British colonial government would have applied the confederate system to determine the administration of the newly organized Gonja District as it did for the Lawra area.⁵² Under such arrangement, Gonja, Nawuri and Nchumuru areas would have been constituted as a confederate state with the presidency rotating among them. Alternatively, the Nawuriwura, rather than the Kanankulaiwura, would have been made the president of the Alfai Local Council.

The failure of the colonial authorities to acknowledge centralized governance structures in Nawuri society produced a number of ramifications. It resulted in a struggle for seniority and presidency of the Alfai Native Authority, and later Alfai Local Council, between the Kanankulaiwura and the Nawuriwura, a struggle which deepened the discord between the Gonja and the Nawuri. Furthermore, it made the Gonja reluctant to recognize Nawuri chiefs or the existence of their chieftaincy structures as legitimate and customary. It was this failure of the Gonja to recognize Nawuri chiefs and to have them represented in their traditional administration that antagonized the ethnic groups and formed a remote cause of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict of 1991 and 1992.⁵³ Finally, as chieftaincy among the Nawuri was described as a postcolonial development, the Nawuri were categorized as a *minority* ethnicity with its attendant implication that allodial rights in Alfai did not reside in them. On the other hand, as Gonja polity was recognized as a centrality, they were regarded as a *major* ethnic group, thus creating the impression that allodial rights in Alfai resided in them. It was these contrasting phenomena that set the Nawuri and the Gonja on a collision path over allodial rights in Alfai, which eventually led to the Nawuri-Gonja conflict of 1991 and 1992.

Conclusion

⁵² Faced with the problem of establishing a large centralized state in the Lawra area of the present day Upper West Region of Ghana, the colonial government created the Lawra Confederacy for the four equal divisions of Lawra, Jirapa, Nandom and Lambussie. Under the arrangement, the presidency of the confederacy rotated from one division to the other. For details of the Lawra Confederacy, see Carola Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2007), 108.

⁵³ Ampiah, part I, 71.

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A number of key findings emerge from this study. In the first place, the supposition that centralized states in Northern Ghana in the pre-colonial era were those of the Mole-Dagbani and the Gonja is simplistic. Tiny centralized states such as those of the Manlarla of Kaleo, Wichau of Dorimon and autochthonous Guan-speaking peoples existed in Northern Ghana in the pre-colonial period side by side with large empires such as those of the Mole-Dagbani and Gonja. Besides, the oral history of the Nawuri points to the existence of chieftaincy among them prior to their arrival in Nawuriland in the fourteenth century. Nawuri society had chiefs and chieftaincy among them was established as a political institution in their original home in Larteh-Akuapem in southern Ghana long before their arrival in Nawuriland, a sufficient basis for their classification as a centralized group with their own chieftaincy institution. Similar arguments could be made about other ethnic groups in Northern Ghana. Thus, in studying the institution of chieftaincy in Nawuri society, scholars should discount the colonial description of Nawuri society as “acephalous”, and examine their pre-colonial political institutions in the context of centralized societies. The political changes that occurred in the 1930s and the subsequent designation of Nawuri society as “acephalous” must be analyzed in the context of colonial interest, rather than ‘customary’ legitimacy and history. Colonial interest compelled the colonial authorities not to recognize Nawuri chiefs, a situation which led to a prevailing view that Nawuri society was “acephalous” in the pre-colonial era.

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