

# The Gods, Spirits And Magical Powers At War: Reflections On The Psychological Dimension Of The Nawuri-Gonja Conflict, Northern Ghana

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## Abstract

In 1991 and 1992, the Nawuri and the Gonja clashed over allodial rights in lands in the Nawuri area of the present-day Kpandai District in the Northern Region of Ghana. The conflict was cataclysmic, and throughout its conduct, there were psychological dimensions. In all the events before the conflict and throughout the phases of the conflict, metaphysical and superstitious resources were utilized and became the fulcrum in the conduct of the conflict. As the conflict occurred in the part of Ghana where superstition and belief in spiritual powers was an integral part of people's psychology, the Nawuri and the Gonja naturally provided space for the gods, spirits, and magical powers in the conduct of the conflict. With an ingrained philosophy that empiricism is controlled by metaphysical forces, the Nawuri and the Gonja mixed superstition in every aspect of the conflict. This paper examined the extent to which superstitious beliefs played a catalytical psychological role in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. It analyzed the space provided for spiritual forces – the gods, spirits, and magical powers – and the extent to which these psychological factors determined the course of the conflict. The paper argued that it is impossible to reconstruct a cogent narrative of the conflict – both in terms of its conduct and the scale – without recourse to the psychological factors.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Gods, Gonja, Kpandai, Magic, Metaphysical, Nawuri, Northern Ghana, Psychological, Rituals, Spirits, Superstition

## Introduction

The present-day Kpandai District is made up of two ethnic-controlled areas, namely, the Nawuri and the Nchumuru areas. Both the Nawuri and the Nchumuru are Guans, whose history is intricately woven into the history of the autochthonous Guans in Ghana (Mbowura, 2012; Brukum, 2001). Historically, the Nawuri and the Nchumuru were the first to settle in their respective areas in pre-colonial times (Mbowura, 2012; Brukum, 2001). Over time, the Gonja and other immigrant ethnic groups – mainly the Bassari and the Konkomba – ventured into the areas for settlement, and this was

largely driven by social and economic considerations.

Following the European powers' scramble and partition of Africa, the present-day Kpandai District was brought under German Togoland in 1899, and was administered as an integral part of the Kete-Krachi District. Initially, German rule did not alter the historical relations between the Nawuri (the indigenes) and the Gonja (immigrants), as Nawuri traditional sovereignty and ownership of the lands in the Nawuri area of the present-day Kpandai District remained intact (Mbowura, 2012). However, in 1913, the Germans interfered in the traditional status quo when, through a warrant,

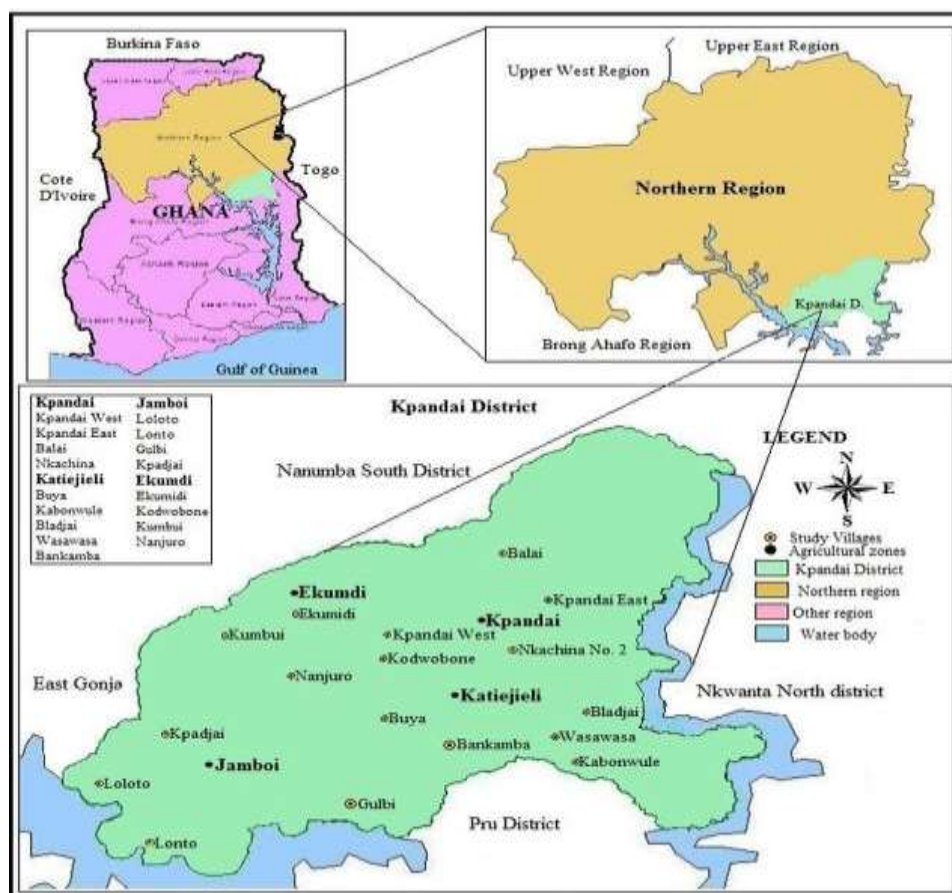
German authorities recognized a Gonja as the overlord in the Kpandai area much to the chagrin of the Nawuri (Mbowura, 2012). The German political arrangement was purely intended for administrative efficiency, as they perceived Nawuri leaders as unenlightened and unintelligent to provide efficient political leadership for the advancement of German colonial interests (PRAAD (Accra) ADM 11/1/1621). This singular political maneuvering of the German colonial authorities had enormous cascading effects on the history of the relations between the Nawuri and the Gonja. First, it turned the Nawuri from a hitherto sovereign and independent people into Gonja subjects. Second, it led to the 'invention of history', as the Gonja evolved new narratives to support their rule over the Nawuri. At the same time, the Gonja invented narratives to change the narrative on allodial rights in lands in the area in their favour. It was this invention of history that laid the foundation for a contest over allodial rights in lands in the Nawuri area in the present-day Kpandai District (Mbowura, 2012; Brukum, 2001).

In 1919, German Togoland was partitioned between Britain and France following the defeat of Germany in World War I. Following the partition, the present-day Kpandai District came under British rule. British political policy in the area continued the political policy of the Germans. British colonial authorities did not only recognize the Gonja as the overlords in the area, but they also went a step further by amalgamating the area with the Gonja District in the famous amalgamation policy of 1932 that foreshadowed the introduction of indirect rule (Ladouceur, 1979). The amalgamation policy aimed at reorganizing

districts in Northern Ghana to be conterminous with the big traditional states in the region (Ladouceur, 1979). The amalgamation heightened the tension between the Nawuri and the Gonja. Throughout the colonial era, there were ominous signs that war would break out between the two ethnic groups over claims of allodial rights in lands in the area. All that was needed was a trigger, and this was provided in 1991 in a dispute over a parcel of land in Kpnadai. The conflict occurred in three phases – the first phase began on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1991 and ended with the defeat and expulsion of the Nawuri from their settlements. The second phase began on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1991 when the Nawuri returned from their hideouts and chased the Gonja out of Kpandai after days of spirited fighting. Following their defeat in the second phase of the conflict, the Gonja were evacuated by the Government of Ghana to Salaga and other parts of Gonja-controlled areas in the present-day Savannah Region. However, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1992, a contingent of Gonja warriors returned to Kpandai and renewed the armed conflict with the Nawuri – the third phase of the conflict.

Before the outbreak of the conflict and in all the phases of the conflict, both ethnic groups marshalled all kinds of resources, including psychological factors that took the form of the utilization of superstitious resources. Predominantly, both ethnic groups aligned the empirical aspects of the conflict with supernatural forces, utilizing their gods, spiritual forces, and magical powers as the psychological resources of the conflict. This study examined the extent to which psychological resources or factors in the form of the utilization of supernatural forces shaped the conflict.

**Fig. 1:** Geographical Location of Kpandai District



Source: Seidu et al. (2017: 796)

## Methodology

The paper employed the explanatory case study design with an orthodox historical approach. The explanation case design seeks to “clarify why and how there is a relationship between two aspects of a situation or phenomenon (Kumar, 2014: 13). In this study, the explanatory case design is used to establish and explain the relationship between psychological factors and the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. Data for this study were drawn from secondary and primary sources. First, the study reviewed published documents, both secondary and primary documents, that provided historical accounts of the conflict and other conflicts in Northern Ghana. The essence was to anchor the study in narratives on the existing historical accounts of conflicts in Northern Ghana. The textual data were supplemented with primary data drawn from the field. Field data were collected through interviews with people that witnessed the conflict. In all, twenty-five people that witnessed the conflict were interviewed over a period of four months of field study. Interview questions were unstructured, as it afforded the researchers the latitude in the conduct of the interview. As Kumar (2014: 177) puts it, “the main strength of the unstructured interview lies in having almost

complete freedom in terms of its structure, contents, question-wording, and order.” Interviews were recorded, which were later transcribed and analyzed alongside the available textual data.

## Studies on Conflicts in Northern Ghana

Between 1981 and 2002, Northern Ghana was the epicenter of intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts. These conflicts have attracted the attention of scholars, who have devoted space to them in scholarship. Studies on conflicts in Northern Ghana are diverse, too diverse to analyze them individually. For the sake of convenience, the diverse studies on conflicts in Northern Ghana can be divided into two broad areas. First, there is a burgeoning literature on the historicity of the conflicts. These studies establish the historical roots of the conflicts from two main perspectives – from the perspective of colonialism and the perspective of the modern state. Some of the studies extended the focus beyond the historical roots of the conflicts to include the conduct and effects of the conflicts (Brukum, 1999, 2000 & 2001; Bogner, 2009; Jonsön, 2007; Tolton, 2010; Awedoba 2009; Lentz, 2007; Anamzoya, 2010; Anamzoya and Tonah, 2012; Skalnik, 1983, 1987 & 1989). The second category of literature on

conflicts in Northern Ghana provides a nuanced picture of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, as well as the social and economic dimensions of the conflicts. Few of the studies pushed the frontiers of their focus further to include gender and religious dimensions of the conflict, while others discussed the security aspects of the conflicts (Tonah, 2007; Mohammed, 2007; Mbowura, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2020, 2021 & 2022; Bombandi, 2007; Longi, 2013; Braimah and Mbowura, 2018; Lentz, 2007a & 2007b). Few others fused the two approaches, providing either anecdotal or a holistic approach to some aspects of conflicts in Northern Ghana, though they can conveniently be placed under one of the two main traditions (Mbowura, 2012; Longi, 2013). Hence, the two main categorizations provided in this study are not rigid; some studies cut across the two approaches to the study of conflicts in Northern Ghana.

This paper is situated within the second approach to the study of conflicts in Northern Ghana. It seeks to provide the psychological dimension of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. Though the second approach has provided copious information about the social, economic, political, religious and cultural dimensions of the conflict within the purview of reconciliation, peacebuilding, post-conflict transformation, etc., little or no space has been given to the psychological dimensions of conflicts in Northern Ghana. This study seeks to fill this lacuna in scholarship. Using the Nawuri-Gonja conflict as a case study, this study unpacked the psychological resources or metaphysical weapons that shaped the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. This study is significant because it provides a template or another perspective on the study of conflicts in Northern Ghana. The accounts and conclusions of this study can be used as benchmarks for the historical reconstructions of other conflicts in or outside Northern Ghana.

## Empirical Analysis

Analysis of the data for this study was divided into three subsections. Each subsection dissected the psychological factors using empirical evidence gathered from field data and textual studies.

### *The Gods, Spirits, and Magical Powers in the Pre-War Period*

In April 1991, armed violence broke out between the Nawuri and the Gonja over allodial rights to lands in Kpandai and its environs in the Present-day Kpandai District in the Northern Region of Ghana. Pre-war accounts indicate that the two

ethnic groups masterfully engaged in superstitious warfare before the outbreak of the war. As traditionalists, the Nawuri frantically made sacrifices to their deities to avert the outbreak of war. According to Mbowura (2012: 159), “the socio-political and economic lives of the traditional Nawuri were deeply rooted in their belief in their deities – *Idakpa*. Each Nawuri community had its *idakpa*; so, did individuals and families. Among the most powerful *idakpa* in Alfai were *Nnanjulo*, *Nana Esuwele*, *Chulin*, *Joogon*, and *Kankpe*.” From community to community, “the Nawuri performed rituals to their deities to invoke their spiritual powers to defenestrate the clouds of war on the horizon. However, ritual after ritual, there was one clear revelation: the war between the Nawuri and the Gonja was inevitable to break out at the time, and that it had already been played out in the spiritual paradigm” (interview with Nana Boila Mbowura, Kpandai, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023). Resigned to the fate of fighting a war as revealed by the deities, some Nawuri communities engaged in acts of ritualization to protect their communities from the impending war. In Kpandai, for example, “concoctions believed to possess undeniable potent of invoking spiritual powers for protection and fortification for ritualized individuals were prepared in the shrine of the *joogon* deity. Brimming with confidence of the psychological efficacy of the concoctions, individuals – traditionalists and Christians alike – trooped to the *joogon* shrine to take spiritual baths of the concoctions under the ministrations of Nana Anekor” (interview with Nana Ebotowson Atorsah, Kpandai, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023). The belief among the Nawuri that drinking or taking ritual bathes fortified a person spiritually and protected him/her from harm was synonymous with the belief of the Kikuyu of Kenya, who believed that drinking potion would repeatedly turn the bullets fired by the white men into the water – *maji maji* (Markovitz, 2010). The psychological significance of the Nawuri ritual bathes was sufficiently clear: it provided a psychological weapon for the participants to overcome the perilous times ahead.

There were similar accounts of Gonja invocations for celestial interventions before the outbreak of the armed conflict. Accounts of Gonja spirituality before the outbreak of the conflict painted a picture of the Gonja, a predominantly Muslim community, engaging Muslim spiritualists to command celestial powers to break the spell of war that was looming. Other Gonja accounts revealed another psychological dimension of the conflict – Gonja spiritual partners had used their privileged position

to invoke celestial powers to fight the impending war on their behalf. This psychological “intervention” emboldened the Gonja to remain steadfast in the course of the war. The psychological interventionism approach of the Gonja was not limited to the local scene; the Gonja sought spiritual interventions from spiritualists outside the shores of Ghana. In both the local and international psychological interventions that the Gonja sought, one common theme emerged: the celestial powers the Gonja sought their interventions had already won the war in the spiritual realm for them. In fact, “a high feeling of certainty engulfed Gonja cycles that the war had already been fought and won for them in the spiritual paradigm by their spiritualists, and that it only needed a physical realization – a psychological factor that made the Gonja push the wheels of war to a point of no retreat” (Interview with a Kotokoli informant, Kpandai, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2022).

Spiritual interventionism was not limited to the ethnic level; it received manifestation at the individual level. Individuals’ engagements in ritualization took various forms. Individuals of both ethnic groups partook in rituals to appease their gods and solicit celestial protection. It also took the form of the acquisition of charms to fight off doom. Furthermore, individuals also took measures to acquire spiritually-fortified wearables such as war garments (*gbogno*). The *gbognos* were studded with charms, and they were believed to have spiritual powers to protect the wearers from gunshots. In fact, “the *gbognos* were wearable traditional technological devices that served as bulletproofs. Wearers of the *gbognos* were spiritually protected, as the *gbognos* were said to possess powers that neutralized gunshots. The *gbognos* were tried and tested traditional bulletproofs” (interview with Nana Samson Donkor, Kpandai, 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2023). Psychologically, the

*gbogno* factor invoked a sense of altruism among those privileged to possess them to fight for the course of their ethnic groups. It was this psychological factor that made one Gonja educationist wear his *gbogno* to ride a motorbike through the principal streets in Kpandai a day before the outbreak of hostilities to display his spiritual fortification and – by extension – the fortification of the Gonja, an action that portrayed the credulity of the psychological factors in the narrative of the outbreak of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. The psychological impact of the *gbogno* and other spiritual interventions were catalytical to the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. As one informant put it: If you take out the *gbogno* factor or the factor of the belief in celestial interventions out of the equation in any analysis of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict, you would be mistaken. From hindsight, it was probable that the drift to war would not have taken the momentum it took if the aggregate of the psychological factors had not been impactful. Without the belief in spiritual fortifications, the drift to war would have probably been truncated. The drift to war and the course of the war were largely shaped by psychological factors, including the *gbogno* enigma and the belief in the interventions of other celestial powers (interview with Nana Kojo Awuku, Kpandai, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023).

The above quotation illustrated the colossal role that psychological factors played in the drift to the outbreak of the conflict. In short, “the gradient of the belief in psychological factors and the momentous drift to the Nawuri-Gonja conflict were symmetrical. Largely, it was the psychological factors that quickened the drift to war, and turned the war that was believed to have already been fought in the spiritual realm from a psychological myth to a reality” (interview with Nana Samson Donkor, Kpandai, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023).

**Plate 1:** Spiritually Fortified Bullet-Proof War Garment (*Gbongno*)





Source: Authors' Field Research, 2022

### ***The Psychological Factors in the Conduct of the Nawuri-Gonja Conflict***

Religion permeates all facets of the life of the Africans. As Mbiti (1989: 1) argued, "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it." It should be borne in mind that the utilization of superstitious resources or religion, in general, is integral to the African way of life. As Ranger (1985: 51) put it:

religious teachings and symbols often bore very directly on the question of sovereignty and legitimacy. Rulers were legitimized through ritual recognition, and when a ruler and his people determined to defend their sovereignty they naturally drew heavily on religious symbols and ideas.

The use of metaphysical weapons was not limited to the defense of the sovereignty of states in Africa; they were equally mobilized in all wars fought for offensive and defensive purposes.

Belief in spiritual powers is a common phenomenon in Northern Ghana. Susurrations of the use of spiritual powers or magic abound in the oral narratives on the conduct of wars in Northern Ghana. Spiritual powers and magic are an integral part of the architecture of armed conflicts in the region. According to Mbowura (2012: 201), an informant holds the view that "since time

immemorial charms have played an important role in fortifying roles of battles ... There are lots of witchdoctors in northern Ghana and ... warriors possess powerful charms ... For one to be a successful warrior in this region, the one must possess powerful charms." This claim underlines the integral role psychological factors play in the architecture of armed conflicts in Northern Ghana. However, it is difficult to quantify the impact of these psychological factors in armed conflicts in Northern Ghana. Notwithstanding this admission, one cannot discount the role of psychological factors play in armed conflicts in Northern Ghana. As Mbowura (2012: 201) argued, "it is difficult to determine the exact percentage of the impact of psychological factors in conflicts in northern Ghana in general. However, it appears that in almost all the wars in the region since the 1980s, psychological factors have played a significant role in the conduct and the gory imaginaries of the wars."

Oral accounts of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict provide the extent of the intrusion or usage of spiritual powers in the conduct of the conflict. In both the accounts of the displays in the theatre of war and the explanation of the trajectories of the conflict, psychological factors are intricately intertwined with logical narratives. Oral accounts show that both combatants – the Nawuri and the Gonja – resorted to the use of charms, magic, and spiritual powers in the conflict. According to Attah Anawusa, one of the fighters in the conflict, "all the

combatants used some spiritual powers and magical powers of some sort. Even Christians – mostly Catholics – who fought in the conflict wore rosaries and believed that the rosaries were not only spiritual artifacts, they also served as points of contact with God and the Saints for protection. Non-Christian fighters in the conflict – both Muslims and traditionalists – used charms and other religious objects as means of protection” (interview with Attah Anawusa, Kpandai, February 20, 2023).

The socio-cultural and economic traditions of the Nawuri and the Gonja tended to make them have a strong sense of belief in magical powers and spiritual interventions in their lives (Ampiah, 1991). Traditionally, the Nawuri were largely farmers and hunters. As these economic activities were carried out on lands exposed to dangerous animals, the traditional Nawuri farmer and hunter was inclined to believe in spiritual fortifications. There were claims that the “most successful Nawuri hunters in the past were those that were spiritually fortified. With their spiritual powers, they were able to carry out their hunting expeditions in wild forests, where they were said to have overpowered lions, buffalos, and other wild animals. Some of them were said to have been able to fight and overpower mystical forces, including dwarfs and satanic forces, *sasabonsam* (interview with Nana Kwadjo Awuku, Kpandai, March 20, 2023). Historical facts abound that prove the astuteness of the Nawuri as both hunters and warriors. As astute hunters and warriors, the Gonja sought the alliance of the Nawuri to fight off the Asante invasion of the eastern part of the Gonja kingdom in 1744-45. When the Asante army arrived to fight the Gonja, they “met the sultan of Kunbi (Kpembe) with his troops ... and the sultan of Alfāyi (Gonja chief in Kpandai) with his troops, the Nācūri [Nawuri] ... They all fought against Asay (Asante) until the people of Asay (Asante) overcame them and they ran away” (Wilks, Levtzion and Haight, 1986: 197). Similarly, in the Kpembe civil war of 1892-93, the Lepo Gate of the Gonja in Kpembe sought the alliance of the Nawuri due to their acknowledged prowess as spiritually-fortified legendary hunters and warriors. According to Braimah and Goody (1967: 31), despite the legendary prowess of the Nawuri as astute and spiritually-fortified hunters and warriors, “about 500 Nawura [Nawuri] lost their lives on the battlefield.” One thing that pointed to the spiritual fortification of the Nawuri warriors in the war was how one Nawuri warrior was said to have defied empirical logic and survived severe

wounds. According to Braimah and Goody (1967: 31), the Nawuri warrior “had a wound in the stomach and his intestines were protruding. He was taken prisoner by Sulemana and brought to Latinkpa, where he was tied to a tree. He asked Sulemana to push his guts back in place, but some fat prevented this and so he asked him to cut it away with a knife. This Sulemana chivalrously did and pushed the man’s intestines back into his stomach.” According to the Nawuri, the survival of the said Nawuri warrior was not empirically possible; it was only a function of his spiritual fortification. Hence, since the precolonial era, the myth of spiritual fortification or psychological factors were part of Nawuri narrative on the exploits of Nawuri hunters and warriors.

There are similar accounts of the spirituality of the Gonja in the precolonial times. Narratives on Gonja origins provided space for the spiritual undercurrents in the victory of the Gonja over the autochthonous ethnic groups in parts of Northern Ghana in the present-day Savannah Region. Accounts of the foundation of the Gonja kingdom point to the presence of a powerful Mallam, Fatigi Morukpe, who offered prayers for the success of the invading expeditions of the founding ancestors of the Gonja kingdom (Braimah, 1967). Narratives on the precolonial history of the Gonja underscore the role of the Muslim community (*karamo*), descendants of the Mande Muslims in the invading army of the Gonja, played in Gonja history and religion (Goody, 1971). From a religious point of view, the Gonja, who were largely Muslims, patronized mallams and had a strong belief in spirituality. It was this history of belief in and experiences with spirituality that laid the foundation for the psychological dimension of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict.

Opinions vary about the weight and utility of charms, magic, and resort to spiritual powers in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. To some, it is impossible to remain safe in the obstreperous magnitude of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict without any spiritual protection. As Anane, a Nawuri warrior put it, “first and foremost, it is ignoble for a warrior to demonstrate a high level of courage and bravery. Beyond these qualities, a warrior must possess some spiritual powers to be able to slither through gunshots of the opponents unhurt” (interview with Anane, Kabonwule, January 18, 2023). To others, charms and magic give the possessors elements of invisibility and invincibility in armed conflicts. As Dare Samile, a participant in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict averred, “warriors in the conflict used

charms, magic, and resort to spiritual powers to make them invisible to their enemies. In addition, the religious objects and the spiritual powers warriors marshalled empowered them to the extent that they became invincible, making them immune to bullets and undefeatable.” In some instances, warriors possessed magical powers that enabled them to disappear from the war scene when the tumultuous current of the war tilted against them (interview with Dare Samile, Kpandai, February 21, 2023). Accordingly, “in a typical African mentality that links everything to spirituality, real men capable of serving as warriors for offensive and defensive warfare are the spiritually-fortified men. This was true of the thinking of the traditional Nawuri and Gonja at the time. Hence, throughout the battles of the conflict, it was those warriors who were believed to be spiritually-fortified, especially Yaw Dou and Asimani, Nawuri, and Gonja warriors, respectively, that stood out as the most distinguished warriors in the conflict” (interview with Samile Dare, Kpandai, February 21, 2023). Yet, others argue that the usage of charms and amulets in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict was nothing but a psychological device. They were “merely psychological expressions that gave the possessors the psychological belief that they were not alone in the battles of the conflict; celestial powers have been enlisted for protection. I was reliably informed that some of the charms and amulets worn by some of the warriors in the armed conflict possessed no spiritual powers. They were used as psychological tools to frighten their opponents to give them a psychological advantage in the armed conflict” (interview with Attah Kwame Francis, Kpandai, March 15, 2023). A Nawuri who fought in the conflict bluntly referred to the charms and amulets worn by some of the warriors in the conflict as spoofs and subterfuges. In his own words:

there was no spiritual power in the amulets and charms worn by the warriors in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. The so-called charms and amulets were physical devices that were used as psychological weapons against enemies. For example, the charms and amulets studded in the famous *gbognos* worn by the Gonja warriors had no spiritual powers. In reality, the *gbognos* had metallic objects lined in the interior that made bullets bounce off from the wearer. When the Nawuri warriors eventually learned the trick behind the *gbognos*, they no longer targeted the chest and the lower ribs of the Gonja warriors since the metal blades in the *gbognos* made those parts of the Gonja warriors impenetrable by gunshots. Instead, the Nawuri warriors targeted the upper part of the bodies of

their enemies – mainly the neck and head. With this strategy and coupled with the fact that the metal blades in the *gbognos* made them heavy to the extent that the wearers could not run, Gonja warriors were easily killed, some of them with just one gunshot. If the charms and amulets in the *gbognos* contained spiritual powers, the Gonja warriors would have remained unhurt despite the change of Nawuri shooting strategy (interview a Nawuri warrior who fought in the Nawuri-Gonja, Kabonwule, March 11, 2023).

Despite the divergent opinions on the spiritual colossus of the charms, amulets, and magical objects used by warriors in the theatre of war in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict, it is a misnomer to defenestrate the psychological dimension of the conflict entirely. Indeed, “magical powers displayed by Yaw Dou (Nawuri warrior) and Asimani (Gonja warrior) were testimonies of how psychological elements were applied to the conflict and how they shaped the course of the conflict” (interview with Samile Dare, Kpandai, February 21, 2023). According to Mbowura (2012), psychological factors are an integral part of the gamut of factors that accounted for the victory of the Nawuri in the second battle of the armed conflict. According to him,

resorting to rituals and charms contributed to the victory of the Nawuri in the second phase. The Nawuri was said to have acquired charms from the Konkomba chief of Lugni, a powerful and well-acclaimed juju man. The use of the charms inspired them with a sense of invincibility and immunity from gunshots. By predicting victory for the Nawuri, the juju man psychologically inspired the Nawuri troops (Mbowura, 2012: 210). The above quotation underlined the place of psychological factors in the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. It is significant to note that, at the time of consulting the witch doctor, the Nawuri had lost the first battle of the conflict and had sought refuge in parts of present-day Nanumba-North, Nanumba-South, Nkwanta-South and Nkwanta-North Districts (Mbowura, 2002; Mbowura, 2012). According to the Nawuri, the magical objects prepared by the witch doctor were wrapped in a towel and sponge of Nana Atorsah Okore Bresiam I, the Kpandaiwura. The substances, together with the towel and sponge, were sneaked into Kpandai at night and buried in the Nawuri section of the town (interview with Nana Atorsah Okore Bresiam I, Kpandai, January 15, 2023).

If psychological factors played a role in the victory of the Nawuri in the second battle (phase) of the



conflict, they were catalytical to the renewal of the conflict – the third phase of the conflict. Following the defeat of the Gonja in the second phase of the battle, they were evacuated to Salaga and other parts of Gonja-controlled areas in the present-day Savannah Region of Ghana (Mbowura, 2012; Ampiah, 1991). On May 23, 1992, Gonja warriors from Gonja-controlled areas returned to Kpandai and renewed hostilities (the third battle or phase of the conflict) with the Nawuri. Mbowura (2002 & 2012) examined the causes of the renewal of hostilities of the conflict. Among the gamut of factors responsible for the third phase of the armed conflict were psychological factors (Mbowura, 2002 & 2012). Explaining the role of psychological factors in the renewal of hostilities in the third phase of the armed conflict, Mbowura (2002: 189) stated:

Psychologically, Gonja warriors were said to have acquired a lot of ‘charms’ and ‘spiritual preparations’ that enabled them to ‘vanish’ when the tide was sliding against them. The ‘spiritual preparations’ were alleged to have given the Gonja warriors ‘bullet-proof protection.’ It was further alleged that the ‘spiritual preparations’ enabled the Gonja war leader, Alhaji Musah Jawula, to gather a swarm of bees around him, which he could release to attack the Nawuri.

Given this psychological situation, “Gonja warriors were emboldened by the aura of spiritual protection and invincibility ...” (Mbowura, 2012: 204). Having initially expelled the Nawuri from Kpandai in a surprise attack, the Gonja warriors congregated at the market square for a ritual meal (Mbowura, 2012). With a large chunk of beef seized from the butchery at the Kpandai market, the Gonja warriors prepared the ritual meal to celebrate their victory (Mbowura, 2002 & 2012). The meal was also intended to ritualize themselves for spiritual fortification and protection. Describing the essence of the ritual meal, an informant argued:

The ritual meal was a dual-purpose meal. First, the Gonja warriors used it to celebrate their triumphant entry and occupation of Kpandai. It was a victory celebration of a kind. Second, the ritual meal had spiritual connotations. The meal was a self-purification and a self-cleansing one that was intended to spiritually cleanse the Gonja warriors and fortify them for the task ahead. That explained why the meal was mixed with some substances and concoctions believed to conjure spiritual powers. By extension, therefore, the ritual meal has more psychological undertones than any logical underpinnings (interview with Attah Anawusa, Kpandai, February 20, 2023).

Whether the ritual meal was driven by empirical or psychological factors, one thing was clear: “Gonja warriors believed that their fortification in Salaga before they arrived in Kpandai, together with the ritual cleansing in the form of the ritual meal taken at the Kpandai market, they had transformed themselves into invincible beings that could not be harmed by any weapon. It was this psychological belief that created a tumultuous feeling of victory in the camp of the Gonja warrior” (interview with Nana Samson Donkor, Kpandai, March 10, 2023). Empirical evidence gathered from eyewitnesses supports the assertion that the aura of spiritual protection in the camp of the Gonja warriors was unquestionable. Accounts of settlers, largely the Kotokoli, who visited the Gonja warriors before Nawuri reprisals, revealed that the Gonja war leader (Alhaji Musah Jawula) boasted of spiritual fortification to the extent that he and his warriors were insulated from physical and spiritual attacks from the enemy. Other pieces of empirical evidence lent credence to the psychological perspective of the Gonja penetration into Kpandai in the third phase of the armed conflict. First, there was a young boy (believed to be a virgin) that carried a calabash of water with spiritually-inoculated concoctions that had the power of neutralizing any spiritual weapons of the enemy against the Gonja army (interview with Nana Mbowura Boila, the Odikro of Kpandai, January 10, 2023). Throughout the procession of the Gonja army into the heart of Kpandai, their leader dipped a spiritually-fortified broom into the concoction and sprinkled droplets of the water on either side of the road as a sign of cleansing reminiscent of the sprinkling of holy water in Catholic liturgy (interview with Nana Samson Donkor, Kpandai, March 10, 2023). Second, in the reprisal attacks of the Nawuri and their allies against the Gonja, Alhaji Musah Jawula, the leader of the Gonja army, was said to have demonstrated Gonja belief in spiritual powers in two ways. In the first place, he was said to have fruitlessly made magical conjurations to gather a swarm of bees to release them to attack the Nawuri army. Furthermore, when the pendulum of the armed conflict swung against the Gonja army, their leader (Alhaji Musah Jawula) was said to have gathered all the Gonja warriors around himself to perform magical thaumaturgies to enable him to vanish with them. However, the magical legerdemains did not work out. It was the failure of the magical powers of the Gonja army that accounted for the ease with which they were defeated by the Nawuri and their allies. As Nana Ebotowson Atorsah put it:

There was no doubt that Alhaji Musah Jawula (the Gonja war leader) had acquired a lot of spiritual powers. He was alleged to have acquired spiritual powers outside the shores of Ghana, possibly from Benin or India. Indeed, there were rumours that he tested his powers in the full glare of onlookers in Kpembe/Salaga to prove their efficacy before he led the Gonja army to Kpandai. Belief in the spiritual powers of Alhaji Musah Jawula was so high in Kpembe and Salaga that residents in these settlements did not believe it when they received the news of the massacre of Alhaji Musah Jawula and his Gonja army in the armed conflict. Given the ingrained belief in the spiritual powers of the Gonja army, particularly its leader, it would have been impossible for the Nawuri to defeat the Gonja if the spiritual powers had proved potent. Nawuri gods and spiritual powers neutralized the spiritual efficacy of the Gonja army, rendering them powerless in the face of Nawuri reprisals (interview with Nana Ebotowson Atorsah, Kpandai, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023).

From the above quotation, it can be deduced that both in Gonja and Nawuri circles, there was empirical evidence that laid the foundation for the unquestioned belief that the Gonja army that penetrated Kpandai in the third phase of the conflict was spiritually-fortified. There was also an unalloyed belief that the spiritual powers of the Gonja army eluded them in the theatre of war. Hence, in both the account of Gonja renewal of the armed conflict and their defeat in the third phase of the conflict, there were psychological undercurrents that cannot be ignored. The failure of Gonja army's spiritual powers in the heat of the armed conflict in the third phase of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict remains a mystery to the Gonja. To the Nawuri, however, the failure was not far-fetched. It was the intervention of Nawuri gods, including the Earth goddess that destroyed the efficacy of the spiritual powers of the Gonja army (interview with Nana Mbowura Boila, the Odikro of Kpandai, January 10, 2023). In the words of a Nawuri informant:

The third phase of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict was far more a spiritual battle than a physical one. There was no doubt that the Gonja army had been fortified spiritually. As the Gonja sprinkled their spiritually-fortified water concoction on the land, it aroused the anger of the Nawuri gods since the land did not belong to the Gonja. As owners of the land, it was the Nawuri that made any ministration of concoctions and sacrifices to the spirits of the land. The Gonja, who were settlers, were culturally prohibited from doing so. Hence, as the anger of the

gods of Nawuri land was aroused by Gonja rituals, they torpedoed Gonja powers and destroyed their efficacy (interview with Nana Ebotowson Atorsah, Kpandai, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023).

Perhaps, "it was to arrest the Nawuri gods and prevent them from intervening in the war that prompted the Gonja to ritualize the land with their concoctions. It was for this same reason that they ritualized themselves by taking the ritual meal at the Kpandai market square. However, since the power of the gods of Nawuriland could not be compromised, Gonja rituals proved spiritually ineffective" (interview with Nana Samson Donkor, Kpandai, March 10, 2023). In short, the narrative above underlines one clear point: in both Nawuri and Gonja cycles, there was an irrefutable claim of the role of psychological factors in the architecture of the third phase of the Nawuri Gonja conflict. In both the accounts of the outbreak of the third phase of the conflict and the defeat of the Gonja army, psychological factors played catalytical roles.

### *Ritualization of the Land*

Ritualization of the land was an integral part of the war efforts of the Nawuri. Before the outbreak of the armed conflict and throughout the phases of the conflict, the Nawuri performed rituals to purify the land and solicit the spiritual intervention of the spirit of the land and the ancestors. To the Nawuri, "no one can win a war without the intervention of the spirits of the land. In the particular case of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict, it was a conflict over allodial rights in lands in the Nawuri area of the Kpandai District. Hence, it was important to ritualize the land to solicit the intervention of the spirit of the land in favour of the rightful owners of the lands" (interview with Nana Ebotowson Atorsah, Kpandai, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023). It is difficult to estimate in empirical terms the extent to which the rituals to purify the land played a role in the war efforts of the Nawuri. Apart from it being a metaphysical weapon, the Nawuri believe that it was through the intervention of the ancestors and the spirit of the land that they emerged victorious in the conflict. As one informant pointed out:

It would have been practically impossible for the Nawuri to defeat the Gonja. The Gonja army had sophisticated weapons including rifles while the Nawuri wielded inferior weapons such as locally manufactured single-barrel hunter guns. At the same time, the Gonja had prominent people in the Government of Ghana. Indeed, at the time of the conflict, a Gonja was the Regional Minister of the Northern Region. There were many other Gonja kinsmen in top positions in government and the

civil service. The Nawuri did not have top people in government, but they had their gods, ancestors, and spirits of the land that they relied upon. Through the rituals, all the spirits of the land rose up and fought the armed conflict in favour of the Nawuri (interview with Nana Mbowura Boila, the Odikro of Kpandai, January 10, 2023).

From the above quotation, it can be surmised that the Nawuri do not limit the elucidation of their victory to empirical factors; they add a metaphysical or psychological dimension to the explanation.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the psychological dimension of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. The paper explained the extent to which psychological resources were integral to the narrative of the Nawuri-Gonja conflict. The paper established that the psychological factors of the conflict were in the form of metaphysical weapons. The study examined three dimensions of the mobilization and utilization of metaphysical weapons in the conflict. First, the paper concluded that both the Nawuri and the Gonja made intense superstitious preparations for the conflict, both at the ethnic and individual levels. Resources were spent for spiritual protection and fortification at both ethnic and individual levels. These psychological elements did not only hasten the drift to armed conflict, but they boosted the confidence of the two ethnic groups in the victory of a conflict that had already been won for them in the spiritual realm. Second, the paper found that a plethora of metaphysical weapons were mobilized and utilized by the Nawuri and the Gonja in the conflict. Charms, magic, and all kinds of spiritual powers were utilized, and they formed an integral part of the course of the three phases of the conflict. In both the narratives on the victories of the combatants and the courses of the phases of the conflict, metaphysical forces or psychological factors were integral. Finally, the paper found that rituals for the Earth goddess were performed for its intervention in the conflict. As the conflict occurred over allodial rights in lands in the Nawuri area, the Nawuri saw the ritualization of the land as a psychological or metaphysical weapon that determined how the conflict played out. In summary, it can be said that the psychological factors did not only push the combatants to armed conflict to a point of no retreat, they also played a role in the magnitude and scale of brutalities in the conflict. Hence, it is impossible to reconstruct a cogent narrative of the conflict – both in terms of

its conduct and scale – without recourse to psychological factors.

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