Perception as a Social Infrastructure for Sustaining the Escalation of Ethnic Conflicts in Divided Societies in Ghana

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Abstract: *The paper draws on interviews with members of affected ethnic groups conducted in various regions, especially in Northern Ghana over a period of two years and a review of primary and secondary documentary sources to provide a graphic analysis of social tensions in divided communities. The analysis will deepen the understanding that Ghana is no exception to violent ethnic conflicts and also makes the case for the National and Regional Peace Councils to focus their programmes and activities in these regions/districts in order to address some of the pressures that have caused such communal violence. These post-conflict societies have achieved cessation of violence and embarked on conflict transformation processes. The establishment of the National Architecture for Peace in Ghana is aimed at creating an inclusive platform for post-conflict societies to engage, understand their positions, interests and needs, build consensus and to nurture durable and sustainable peace.*

The key assumption of this paper is that conflict escalation and spiral violence are a means of social communication; disseminating (symbolic) meaning which is open for interpretations, which, to a large extent are influenced by perceptions which serve to fuel the conflict dynamics. It is not surprising, therefore, that the focus of development studies and policy have shifted to incorporate in their analysis the possible causes and responses to such conflict situations, while working to ensure a merger of development and security.

1. Introduction

The conceptual approach to social perception by Michener et al, (2004) confirms that "social perception refers

to constructing an understanding of the social world from the data we get through our senses. More narrowly defined, social perception refers to the process by which we form impressions whether positive or negative of other people's traits and personalities." In relationship building between nations and groups, perceptions are formed by interactions over time. Values of and threats from others, power distribution, and resource control, each contribute to these perceptions. In social-psychological terms, it is the perception of power, rather than the actual possession of power, which is important. Power is most often perceived in military, economic or political terms. If these terms are perceived as zero-sum, it is likely that conflict will erupt or escalate (Seymour, 2003).

Perceptions are formed early in life through the socialisation process of every person, and unless otherwise challenged, continue to solidify (Seymour, 2003). In conflict situations, Seymour (2003) gives exposition of how parties develop parallel images of the other, with self-perceptions largely positive and perceptions of the other mostly negative. In this sense, violence and aggression become associated with the other party while virtue and justice qualities are possessed by oneself or one's own group. However, the danger with perceptions is that, while they are drawn from reality, over time they create reality (Seymour, 2003). Self-perception underlies the notion of identity in every conflict context. Thus, perceptions of identity influence the process of conflicts. Yet identity is still overlooked when attempting to understand the origins of conflict, or in planning its management.

Throughout Ghana, there have been perennial violent inter/intra ethnic, chieftaincy and land conflicts, and the reasons for their escalation have been various and varied. According to Adjapawn (2008) the Northern Region of Ghana alone between 1980 and 2002 had experienced seventeen ethnic groups engaged in twenty-three ethnic conflicts. The Dagomba, Gonjas, Nawuris, Nanumbas, Mamprusis and Konkombas fought in most of the wars. Nineteen of the twenty-three violent conflicts were interethnic while only four were intra-ethnic. While in the Volta region there have been perennial violent intra ethnic, chieftaincy and land conflicts

between the Nkonyans and Alavanyons, the Peki and Tsitos, the Anlo paramountcy chieftaincy dispute (Amidu, 2010).

In the central region, the Gomoa/Effutu land dispute, in the Ashanti Region the perennial Trobodom Chieftaincy conflict which recently erupted in violence and drew in the Paramount Chief of Techiman and the Asantehene and Overlord of the Asante Kingdom are prominent even though there are other on-going conflicts of lesser intensity. The Greater Accra and Western regions of Ghana have their share of both violent and non-violent conflicts of various kinds with chieftaincy conflicts being predominant. In the Eastern region, the Efiduase and Suhyen chieftaincy conflicts are more prominent (Amidu, 2010).

As the conflict history of these communities build up, the groups in conflict mobilize themselves against the negative other, and soon define themselves according to their opposition to that other. This is the case in the Bawku, Dagbon, the Alavanyo/Nkonya, Efiduase and Suhyen conflicts who use the burden of history to justify the emergence of a new conflict context. Thus, the details of their history, the value of which cannot be guaranteed, lead to the formation of new perceptions, and varying degrees of interests, expressed in the various aspects of violence and conflict (Kelman, 1997). In furtherance of his argument, Herbert Kelman, (1997) asserts that in social psychological analysis of conflict; great emphasis is placed on the importance of acknowledging history. Previous wars fought, previous aggressions committed, or previous actions which led to the loss of trust are not easily forgotten. Denying these past realities does not remove them from history. On the contrary, denying/asserting claims rooted in history creates fear and insecurity. In effect perceptions are enhanced by the burden of history and this can exacerbate tensions and heighten the conflict situation. It is important to recognize and accept the negative and positive experiences and consequences of history between parties in order to reduce tensions and to mutually work towards transforming the conflict. It is precisely the dynamics of divided societies which allows the central argument of this article to move beyond the purely normative basis of understanding the factors that sustain conflict escalation of violence.

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This paper will analyse the concept of perception as a social infrastructure by using inter-group theory as its methodology. My argument is that a lack of inter-group good leadership, equality, social enablers, share goals and values, inter-group collaboration through various social networks, perception will deepen prejudices and biases and therefore affect the contours of relationships within a select geographical area. The paper will also emphasis inter-group theory by indicating that inter-ethnic tensions and ethnicisation of the indigenous polity based on perception had caused intra-group conflicts and these have featured prominently in the history of Ghana.

2. Theoretical Views Underpinning Perception and Conflict Escalation

The Classical theory of perception believes that perception results from a process of unconscious inference; these unconscious inferences are formed by past experiences and learning, the perceptions become unconscious inference because people are clearly not aware of making them (Masin, 1993).
According to the Classical theory, one of the most striking aspects of perception is constancy, which refers to how our perception of objects remains the same despite transformative changes in an image/ the environment. There is, however, great agreement that constancy is based in part on the observer using appropriate contextual cues in the environment (Masin, 1993).

Thus, it is of no importance for the larger society to question the sources/the processes and principles from a social psychological perspective on how the 'perceived' information has been processed to enable easy mobilisation for more violence in divided communities. As asserted by (Jönsson, 2007), a common perception among the acephalous groups in Northern Ghana is that the cephalous group members' feeling of superiority has made the general subordination of acephalous groups important to their framework of social relations. Thus, contrary to the intentions and principles of the 1992 constitution of the republic of Ghana, there exists, a widespread amongst ethnic

minority group members, perception of inter-ethnic inequality and discrimination in the fields of education, government influence, resources and appointments, access to justice.

It is based on such biased perceptions and denigration that Allport (1954) argued that for social group harmony, cohesiveness and co-existence, four conditions must exist for a successful and harmonious inter-group contact; firstly, all social groups, regardless of their size, should have equal status; secondly, there has to be social enablers that promote inter-group cooperation; thirdly, inter-group cooperation can only come about if there are shared goals and values; and fourthly, the whole structure of inter-group collaboration has to be assisted by an agreed authority.

However, in Northern Ghana, Allport's (1954) prescriptive conditions for social harmony are arguably, nonexistent. For instance, the British colonial administration tinkered with the traditional arrangement, particularly, within the acephalous societies. Under the guise of indirect rule which had been experimented in Northern Nigeria.

The British colonial administration created chieftaincy institutions among people for whom the institution of chieftaincy was either alien or at best rudimentary (Adjapawn, 2008). Traditionally the position of chief went with control over land and other natural resources in the chief's traditional area. The institution of chieftaincy thus became a social structure within which parties who perceived that their interest, goals and needs where incompatible and could not be achieved concurrently struggled to prevail over each other (Adjapawn, 2008).

In these circumstances, there is no uniform approach to the question of leadership. The leadership that emerges either from any of the ethnics requires one who commands respect across ethnic boundaries, able to build trust, has reconstructive vision and commitment in such a way as to create and nurture the needed relationships and to facilitate the creation of wider social spaces for constructive dialogue (Ury, 1999). This contrasts strongly and sharply with the notion of brute force that still pervades much of the mainstream thinking on of chiefs (as leadership) in Northern

Ghana. Thus, the question of leadership which is central to social harmony is evolving and developing within the frame work of the demands of modern governance processes; inclusiveness, participation, transparency and accountability. And as asserted by Allport (1954), the absence of any/all of these conditions will lead people of the same ethnic group to be connected through their perception of existing social condition/reality.

The instrumentalist theory on ethnic conflict, argues that ethnic conflict is the response to a perceived threat to one's identity. This theory view ethnicity as affecting the constraints individuals face in the pursuit of their objectives (Bates 1983). In the midst of these assertions, the ethnic conflicts in Northern Ghana, especially in the Northern Region that date back to 1941 have been recurring increasingly rapidly since the 1980s and the feuding groups on both sides continue to believe that their cause is justifiable. William (1988) comments:

> *What seems fair to one person may not seem fair to another, and these perceptions are often affected by self interest. However, parties often speak of Justice in absolute terms, as some independent and objective standard of fairness that should be used to determine who is right.*

The chiefly groups in Northern Ghana feel empowered as the rightful owners of the lands and referring to the non-chiefly groups will come out with utterances like: are you from here? Aren't you a stranger? If not, where is your land or territory? The situation today is exacerbated by the large areas in northern Ghana that are inhabited by the non-chiefly groups (Kirby, 1998; 2003) as is the case of the Konkombas, Nawuris and Basaris in the Northern Region, and between settler farmers and indigenes of the Brong Ahafo Region, but in Bawku in the Upper East Region the hitherto non-chiefly group have now become the landowners; a source of the Bawku conflict. Thus, hidden under the issue of chieftaincy and title for land are deep resentment based on perceptions of economic and political inequalities, social and cultural prejudices, and competition for limited resources (Assefa, 2000).

The work of Kurt Lewin (1948) was further developed to show how group affiliation and pressure to gain distinctiveness by comparison with other groups can lead to intergroup conflict escalation; this has concentrated on processes of selective perception through forms of tunnel vision, prejudice and stereotyping. While escalation is commonly used in reference only to means of conducting the conflict, it also refers to other aspects of conflict behavior, including ends and agents (Rubin, et al,1994). The Dagomba chieftaincy conflict of 1938, 1948, and 1953 as the office of Ya-Na became vacant has expressed itself in negative folklore, riddles and on occasions of praise-singing through drumming to undermine and ridicule the other opposing gate (Ferguson et al, 1970).
Denigration and dehumanization of a party in conflict often leads to the psychological reaction of worsening the image of the opponent, a natural tendency which is often decried as lessening chances of reconciliation but which has the functional advantage of justifying resistance. Particular types of adversaries according to the co-chairman of the Bawku Inter-ethnic Peace Committee, Alhaji … such as *'…the Kusasis refer to we the Mamprusis as monkeys, while we Mamprusis also refer to the Kusasis as pigs…'* are unlikely to lead to compromise, rather the animal imagery by both ethnic groups is rather likely to justify renewed struggle (Hoffer 1951, Nicholson 1960, Snyder, et al 1977). The cycle is functional and self-protecting of both ethnic identities. Thus, for a conflict Behavior to occur between two ethnic groups there must necessary be a particular combination of sociocultural distances between them; an opposition of their interests and capabilities, mutual awareness, a significant change in their balance of powers, disrupted expectations, and a will-to-conflict (Kelman, 1997).

There is another major perception in Northern Ghana that assumes that the chiefly groups' religion or way of worship has an impact on their social standing in society and therefore impacts positively on their social endeavours, while the non-chiefly groups' approach to worship is their means to misery, inferiority, uncivilised life and deprivation. This may explain the conflictual relationships that exist between the chiefly and non-chiefly groups-Konkombas and

Dagombas, and Mamprusis and Kusasis in Northern Ghana. Thus, such attitudes in group relationships can generate partisan emotions through the lens of intergroup emotions theory (Mackie et al, 2000; Smith et al, 2007).

More so beneath the differences in worship between the chiefly and non-chiefly groups in Northern Ghana, lies a cultural perception of the groups' beliefs, attracting labels such as 'Sacred or Profane' and 'God-people' or 'Earth-people', the two philosophical dimensions refer to sky or earth. The universal God is associated with the sky (Holy) and the tribal gods are associated with earth. The understanding of these philosophies resides in the meanings and interpretations of God by both Konkombas' and Dagombas' dialects.

To the chiefly groups, the non-chiefly peoples' attachment to their earth god limits their vision, their destiny and ideas, and as such, they are caught in a vicious cycle where the only redemption can come from the God-people, the chiefly groups (Kirby, 2003). Thus, if the differences in the worship of God among the two different groups are engendering friction and subsequent conflict, the reason could lie in the fact that the chiefly groups are enforcing the meaning of their interpretation, while the non-chiefly groups are refuting the interpretations of the chiefly groups' God (Kirby, 1998; Kirby, 2003).

According to the gap principle in conflict, a gap between expectations and power causes conflict. A structure of expectations, once established, has considerable social inertia, while the supporting balance of powers can change rapidly; personal/new interests lines, perceptions, interests shifts, new capabilities can develop, wills strengthened or weakened. A transformation of the conflict cannot take place if the conflict is understood as a "tragic expression of unsatisfied needs" (Rosenberg, 2004). Another challenge for conflict transformation is when the conflict is perceived as a disruption of the status quo of one of the factions. The status quo defines for communities/ ethnic groups and states the ideological and territorial distribution of who has what. It is the core of the structure of expectations. Without a disruption in the status quo the issues in conflict are neither important nor clear enough to warrant violence (Rummel, 1979).

This suggests that conflicts are not the result of just one single factor, such as the perceived difference between peoples of different ethnic affiliations. Conflicts occur when people (or parties) perceive that, as a consequence of a disagreement, there is a threat to their needs, prospects, interests or concerns. Disputants tend to perceive options to be limited and the means and resources available for seeking solutions to be finite (Awedoba, 2009). It is indicative that parties to a conflict mostly respond on the basis of their perception, which may be right or wrong. People filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information available to them, experience and knowledge outcomes on comparable scenarios (Awedoba, 2009).

The development of myths, collective memories, or the burden of communal histories over the course of protracted conflict reinforces biased perceptions of the Self as an unwarranted victim of injustice and portray the other as an intractably evil enemy, often glossing over the complicity of one's own community in past violence. Such beliefs are actively socialized amongst communities and instantiated through processes of transgenerational transmission. These myths serve to further polarize perceptions of antagonism and to solidify hostile relationships, effectively blocking the potential for the development of trust and reinforcing existing fears, prejudices, and stereotypes (Einar, et al, 2000).

In support of this contention is Michell (1981) who indicated that exclusionary 'experiences, fears, and belief systems' generate 'reciprocal negative images which perpetuate communal antagonisms and solidify protracted conflict'. Antagonistic group histories, exclusionist myths, demonizing propaganda and dehumanizing ideologies serve to justify discriminatory policies and legitimise atrocieities and cultural status (Jönsson, 2007).

Inarguably, in the various post-conflict societies in Ghana, Alavanyo/Nkonya, the Bimobas and the Kombas, the Gonjas and the Nawuris, the Gonjas and the Konkombas, and the Kusasis and Mamprusis social interaction is determined by the "system" of sectarianism; it is about what goes on in people's hearts and minds, and it is about the

kind of institutions and structures created in post-conflict society. It is about people's attitudes to one another, about what they do and say and the things they leave undone or unsaid. Moreover, 'sectarian' is usually a negative judgement that people make about someone else's behaviour and rarely a label that they apply to themselves, their own sectarianism always being the hardest to see (Liechty, et al, 2001).

As Østby (2008), argues, "horizontal inequalities capture a collective aspect of relative deprivation which can facilitate mobilization for conflict". It is therefore in this light that the conflicts between the Konkombas and the traditional kingdoms of Northern Ghana have been described by Brukum (1995) as wars of emancipation with one group determined to maintain the status quo and the other fighting to overthrow it. Konkombas actions in these conflicts arise from the desire for recognition and self-assertion (Tsikata, et. al. 2004). Thus, group-based inequalities (be they economic, political, or social) can create a sense of common grievances, increase intra-group solidarity and reinforce a sense of separation between in-group and out-group.

Again, the symbolic politics theory suggests the problem with incomplete peace building efforts is that insufficient attention is given to addressing the emotional infrastructure and symbolic roots of extremist ethnic politics. The theory argues that resolving ethnic war/conflict requires reconciliation–changing hostile attitudes to more moderate ones, assuaging ethnic fears, and replacing the intragroup symbolic politics of ethnic chauvinism with a politics that rewards moderation (Kaufman, 2006). The Mirigu-Kandiga conflict (in the Kasena-Nankana District)-a relatively unknown conflict; illuminates this paradox more sharply. The Peace building efforts of the early 1990s by both government and Civil Society did not yield sustainable milestones for the attainment of peace in the District.

The conflict was manifested again when the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) politicians and supporters presented an independent candidate in 2008 as the Kandiga representative and symbol (Ayelazuno, 2009). This was an electoral miscalculation by the NDC as the opposing parties' representatives went from door-to-door in Mirigu, telling people that if the independent candidate went to parliament he would buy sophisticated

weapons for the Kandiga people to kill Mirigu people. This was not just politics of divisiveness and acrimony, but politics of scaremongering (Ayelazuno, 2009). The message was crafted out of perception and deceit but it achieved its objective effectively as far as its destructive agenda was concerned. This 'political manipulation' succeeded because of the existence of the perception that the issues underpinning the Mirigu-Kandiga conflict have not been resolved and that the possibility for this conflict to escalate in the future is very high.

In Bawku the prevailing perception in the area, according to (Ayelazuno, 2009) was that "the Kusasis were NDC supporters, while the Mamprusis supported the NPP". While in Tamale and Yendi, the Abudu gate is perceived to be sympathetic to the NPP while the Andani gate is pro NDC. The Bawku conflicts of 2000, 2004 and the Dagbon Chieftaincy crisis has been attributed to the commissions and omissions either covertly or overtly of party supporters (MacGaffey, 2006). The net impact is that the daily attitudes and behaviour of party supporters are sustained on perceptions, the sources of which are normally non-existent. Human perception therefore plays an essential role in conflict escalation. Culture, education and societal influences shape our minds and our perceptions. Enemy images are created, convincing groups and individuals that certain needs can only be met by certain strategies and that the other groups are intrinsic obstacles to the other groups' needs being met. While a certain ethnic group's needs for identity, autonomy, protection and equality may be met through a range of strategies, lack of trust and enemy images of the other may convince the group that the only acceptable or possible solution is a conflict (Rosenberg, 2004).

Importantly, ethnicity in Northern Ghana and for that matter other post-conflict societies has come to assume a group of overlapping characteristics and according to Horowitz (2000), ethnic groups are characterised by ascriptive differences identified by colour, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin, including myths of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate. Thus, Dagombas, Kusasis, Gonjas,

Nawuris, Konkombas, the Builsas, the Nawuris, Mamprusis, Dagaabas, Frafras, and Talensis are distinctive in nature and character based on Horowitz's (2000) definition of ethnic group.

According to Kasfin (1979), shared perception therefore, creates social solidarity and turns 'individuals assigned to an ethnic category to an active ethnic group'. Kasfin (1979) further noted, the British colonial rule created multiple ethnic identities, which White (2002) asserts are either 'ranked or unranked'. While in ranked societies, social conventions prescribe difference in subordinate groups concomitant with the perjorative assessment of their very worth, ethnic relations in an unranked system are marked by mutual ambivalence, with negative perceptions balanced by begrudgingly allowances for other group's competence in a given sector'(White, 2002).

The significance of perceptions such as ancestral myths are made clear by Horowitz's definition, which still emphasises the importance of the ascriptive nature of these groups which makes them difficult to exit and essential to social identity.

Thus, the work of Allport (1954) influenced the works of Susan Fiske (2002) as she analysed the role of bias/perception in inter-group conflict and concluded that education and opportunities for economic advancement for marginalised groups produced positive inter-group contact. And that inter-ethnic 'friendships reduce stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination'. It is therefore clear that in post-conflict societies like Alavanyo/Nkonya, Peki/Tsito, Bawku and Dagbon-Konkombas, the conflicts can hardly be transformed into sustainable and durable peace. As noted by Baumann, (2009) "Post-war societies will never be free of conflict, since new conflicts will arise in the future. The right "peace prescription" can only cure a society of its divided past, heal its memories, and reassert a society's capacity to establish common institutions for peaceful conflict management (Baumann, 2009).

In order for post-conflict societies to develop the capacity of establishing common institutions to create platforms for dialogue processes and to build consensus, the sociological concept of "recognition" is a helpful tool. The concept of 'recognition' helps the parties in conflict to

rediscover and assert their humanity and to accept each other as equal partners in the dialogue process. In Axel Honneth (2003) ground-breaking study, the German philosopher argued that "the struggle for recognition" is, and should be, at the center of social conflicts. Even though his argument was challenged by Nancy Fraser (2003), who criticized that within the philosophical debate there was too much emphasis on "recognition" while the important questions surrounding the idea of "redistribution" of scarce resources were marginalized. Axel Honneth (2003) continued to advocate that the "journey" towards mutual "recognition" by society as a whole is at the centre of effective transformative processes that could guarantee sustainable and durable peace in post-conflict societies. This is exemplified by the growing positive relationship between the Konkombas and the Dagombas in the Northern region since the implementation of the Kumasi accord in 1995/6.

The arguments by both Axel Honneth (2003) and Nancy Fraser (2003) indicate that in every post-conflict society, the process of transforming the conflicts to achieve durable peace is contingent on a web of various factors paramount among which are the concepts of 'recognition' and 'distribution' of scarce resources.

In concluding, inter-group relationship in divided societies/communities is a complex issue. It is complex because there are underlying cultural, economic and political dynamics that are not apparent in sociological observations. For instance in the Bunkpurugu/Yinyo District of the Northern region of Ghana, Betts (2002), observes that the remote causes of the conflicts in that district are due to long-standing cases of power relation, denigration, marginalization, disregard for traditional authority and order. Thus, for a conflict to exist the people or groups who are involved must perceive the situation as a conflict.

Interviews with leaders of post-conflict societies revealed that successful strategies for the reconstruction of governance must go beyond simply addressing 'hard' institutional /traditional and structural issues and tackle directly social and psychological needs that, if left unaddressed may otherwise lead to further violence in post-

conflict societies. Case study evidence from post-conflict societies reveals that the end of hostilities via peace agreements are not enough to overcome the bitterness and grievances inherent in protracted conflicts they have previously engaged in, the outcomes of which are social distancing, mistrust, misperceptions, and mutual fears among former 'enemies' (Bar, 2004). Thus, psycho-social efforts are more necessary in the context of post-conflict reconstruction of divided societies, especially if the goal is to promote reintegration into cooperative governance structures and coexistence in a shared community/district/region/nation-state.

It is also true that persistent structural inequalities in the post-conflict societies will continue to reinforce social and psychological perceptions unless the related system of dominance, dependence, and inequity that reinforces and reproduces them is also addressed. Therefore perceptions of relative deprivation by a marginalized community can serve to rigidify group boundaries, inflame feelings of victimization and insecurity, and provide seemingly ample justification for the use of force (Staub, 2006).

More so, unresolved grievances have the tendency to fester if left unaddressed, and as transitional justice scholar Nigel Biggar (2001) has illustrated, this can "help to infect future generations with an indiscriminate hatred of the perpetrators and their descendants.

If the attitudes that lead to conflict are to be mitigated, and if it is taken that psychology drives attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups, then new emphasis must be placed on understanding the social psychology of conflict and its consequences to people/communities involved. Perceptions, however, are not perfect images of reality; through social experience, good leadership, building trust in inter-ethnic relationships, values and interests, deconstructing enemy images and fostering cooperation are therefore key elements in human needs-based conflict resolution in divided communities.

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