Local Politics of Time and Space in Ghana

Christian Lund, Roskilde University.

Introduction

The presence of the past in the present is notable in Bolgatanga. Conflicts over land and chieftaincy are characterized by an intense reference to the past as the source of unadulterated legitimacy of claims to the future. The past and lines of heritage are frequently rehearsed in Ghana. It is a pastime in which everyone who depends on pedigree for position or privilege engages with passion. However, two different forms of past are often at play at the same time (Berry, 2004). On the one hand, reference is made to tradition as a timeless past, a reservoir of “how things have always been done” in the constant flow of time. On the other hand, there is a past made up of significant historical events, of actions and transactions that are invoked with various vindications. The two pasts are rather different from one another. One justifies claims to the future as a seamless continuation of the past; the other justifies them as the result of salient fortunate events. Those who belong to different social positions in the Upper Regions of Ghana, such as earthpriests [tindana] and chiefs, are thus more readily justified by reference either to time immemorial or to historical events of their creation, respectively.

1 This paper builds on research in Ghana conducted from 2002 to 2006. Funding was provided by the Danish Social Science Research Council. The research is also published in Lund 2003; 2006a, 2008 and Wardell and Lund 2006.
2 I owe this neat turn of phrase to Maurice Bloch (1977: 287).
3 The two forms of the past do thus not represent a ritual versus a more mundane conceptualization, as described by Bloch (1977), but are, rather, parallel, both reflecting ritual and mundane elements.
4 In most of Ghana, the customary offices are occupied by the chieftaincy institution – the stool in the South and the skin in the North. However, in what are now the Upper East and Upper West Regions, they also comprise the earthpriest, the custodian of the earth (Pogucki 1955: 8). The roles of chief and earth priest appear to be complementary, the chief constituting the political authority while the earthpriest fulfills more religious or spiritual functions. Indeed, prior to each season of cultivation, the earthpriest must propitiate the land and sacrifice to the gods, and it is also he who must appease the gods in the event of sacrileges committed against the earth (Kasanga, 1996: 8). Generally, the earthpriest is a descendant of the first settler in an area and belongs to the senior segment of the first-comer lineage (Fortes 1940, 1945; Pogucki 1951, 1955). However, the homology and complementarity between the offices of the chief and the earthpriest that Fortes emphasized (1940: 255) do
The past, however, is not the only ambiguous shibboleth in conflicts over land and chieftaincy in northern Ghana. Space, just as the past, is malleable within a concrete cultural setting. Similar to the way the past is invoked in two forms, space figures in two, occasionally compatible, occasionally competing forms. As territory, space has certain political connotations, whereas property in land moves space into a legal domain. As territory, space is governed but not owned by its governing agency. As property, on the other hand, space is owned but not governed by its owners. By owner is meant anyone with a recognized property claim to a particular resource in a given space. Thus no one has exclusive ownership but only property rights circumscribed by others’ property rights. Often property claims overlap and compete, making the issue of property inherently complex and contentious. By juxtaposing property and territory, I do not want merely to throw in more complexity but to provide a lens through which it can be read. Obviously, the ambiguity between territory and property becomes poignant when actors slide between categories – when governors claim to own, or owners pretend to govern.

The semantic openness of the past and of space affords certain patterns of argument and organizational procedure as opportunities arise. In his essay on the past as a scarce resource, Appadurai (1981) argues that the past does not have infinite semantic plasticity. Its rhetorical and strategic applicability depends on some sort of consensus and convention about how the past can be meaningfully debated in a particular society. As a general hypothesis, similar limitations must be expected to prevail for space. The question is what type of argument and what form of political rhetoric is available for whom and with what effect. The two ideas of the past and the two ideas of space favor certain forms of vindication. However, while each claim avails itself more easily to either one or the other social position, there is

---


6 Sack (1986: 19) conceptualizes territorialization as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area.” This comprehensive definition would include territory (the political dimension) as well as property (the legal dimension). In order to identify the tensions between the two strategies, the versatile construction of arguments and their subtle movement between political and legal institutions, I find it useful to distinguish between these two modern forms of controlling space.

7 The idea of ownership as ‘total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the Universe’ (Blackstone, here from Rose (1998: 601)) is exactly an idea. In concrete societies, African as well as ‘Western’, ownership is always circumscribed by others’ rights limiting the exercise of the abstract total right to property.
sufficient adjacency between territory and property for certain actors – whether established by tradition or history – to be able to operate both lines of argument.

Political opportunities for competition, opposition, and debate over space and the past emerge from many corners, but the fecundity of national events, reforms, and politics is often impressive in this respect. Analysis of government reforms easily lends itself to an administrative perspective, where the process is assessed on its deviance from “the plan.” Indeed, national policies and politics matter a great deal as they create intended and unintended dependencies and opportunities. Aside from their intended objectives, administrative reforms and procedures constitute moments of opportunity for local political players to assert, or reassert, to negotiate, or renegotiate, entrenched or more volatile positions in the fabric of local politics. Thus, the changes and readjustments in local government structures and procedures also provide for significant sociopolitical rearrangement beyond a reform’s intended scope. Such movements bring together an amalgamation of legal and political conflict, passionate invocation of history, and tradition as well as images of space as either territory or property in an intense courtship and lobbying for support from without as well as from within the locality.

This paper presents an instance of local political competition arising at moments of opportunity at the confluence of a tenure reform and a decentralization program in Northern Ghana. Here, strategic reference to the past was brought to bear to justify control over land. And space became a domain of competition as various aspects of decentralization, chiefly rivalry, and the creation of a new district hit the agenda. Together this conditioned how conflicts were conducted and perceived. Thus, various domains of local politics interlock and agendas cast in different discourses of space and the past collide to undermine or underpin each other. The case of Kombosco shows how competing claims over land engage different conceptions of space and, as a consequence, different interpretations of the past. It also shows how different stakeholders’ spatial ambition for the future hinge on government’s reading of the past.
The Context of Land and Polity Reform

For northern Ghana the colonial and independent governments’ property rights to land were legally quite limited; the government merely held the land in trust. Hence, government was never the legal owner of the land; it only behaved as if it were. This influenced the common interpretation. The way the state managed its trusteeship of land developed an interpretation, shared by lay and learned alike, that tended to conflate governance of territory with extensive property rights. This interpretation was generalized thanks to government’s unconstrained seizure of land and the fact that the state actually did possess a few plots of land on terms equivalent to those of private individuals or institutions. This ambiguity of space is not reserved for national government and legislation; it goes right down to the smallest political entity of society. The integration of chiefs in the political structure through indirect rule cast a similar ambiguous light on their control over space. While they controlled space as political territory, they often acted as if they owned it as property.

The 1979 Constitution declared that land held in trust by government was henceforth to be handed back to its ‘original owners’. It never specified who they were, however. This meant an opportunity for earthpriests, families, and individuals to rise and claim land rights from government and chiefs and contest an order that had developed throughout the 20th century (Lund, 2008). In the period since 1979, land struggles have thus intensified in the Upper East. Land struggles have also played directly into local politics because of the confusion over whose land rights were ‘restored’ by the constitutional changes of 1979. A couple of landmark court cases in the early 1990s established that financial compensation for government acquisition was to go to those who had lost the possibility of using the land, that is, the villagers. However, the compensation cases also established allodial – or paramount - ownership with the traditional authorities. Moreover, they established the earthpriests, and not

---

8 The land reform element of the 1979 Constitution was later confirmed in the 1992 Constitution, though without greater clarification of the ownership aspect.

9 The allodial title is the highest customary title capable of being held in Ghana and in principle subject only to such limitations, restrictions, or obligations as may be imposed by the general laws of the country (Rocha & Lodoh, 1995: 3). The term allodial title denotes a customary law interest in land not traditionally held by a tenant from a lord. Allodial title is therefore also known as ‘absolute’ or ‘ultimate’ title (Woodman, 1996: 56). In Osborn’s Concise Law Dictionary, allodium is described as ‘Lands not held of any superior, in which, therefore, the owner had an absolute title and not a mere estate’ (Osborn, 1964: 23). Allodial title is, or rather was, established through discovery and first settlement and is essentially communal. Historically, Woodman (1996) and Rocha & Lodoh (1995) argue, allodial title could also be acquired by conquest and subsequent settlement. For doubts about the ‘absolute’ nature of allodial title, see Tait (1952).

4
the chiefs, as the ultimate landowners. This was an unanticipated, but major, side effect of the compensation cases (Lund, 2006a, 2008).

Change in landownership was not the only reform that washed over Northern Ghana over the past decades. Ghana has undertaken a policy of decentralization since the late 1980s, and while there have been various combinations of appointed and elected leadership of district assemblies and sub-district councils, and while tax collection and service provision have lived through various forms, it is safe and sufficient to say that local assemblies and constituencies are central and valuable platforms in Ghanaian local politics (Crook and Manor 1998). 10

Thus, the following case of the Kombosco lands is played out in a context of a recent but not altogether consolidated new structure of landownership and a process of political decentralization where creation of new districts and sub-districts seemed to be an important popular - maybe populist - demand (Ahwoi, 2000; Ayee, 2000).

Situating Kombosco Lands

Kombosco11 is a relatively small village some three miles outside Bolgatanga in the Upper East Region of Ghana. However, with the growth of Bolga, Kombosco has over the past ten to fifteen years gained increasing interest as a suburban residential area. Thus, the Regional Lands Commission’s files show that the interest in acquiring leases there increased over this period (see Table 1).

10 The political relationship between central government and the population in Ghana has been mediated through local political institutions such as chiefs and native authorities during the time of indirect rule and, since 1951, a variety of local government structures at district and sub-district levels (Ayee, 2000; Staniland, 1975, see also Boone 2003: 174-77). The political arguments accompanying readjustments of local government structures and processes often focus on service provision, accountability, and the degree of discretionary powers accorded to the decentralized bodies (Ayee, 1994, 2000; Crook 1987; Crook and Manor, 1998; Dunn and Robertson, 1973; Ladouceur, 1979; Ribot, Agrawal, and Larson, 2006).

11 The spelling of Kombosco varies between documents. In direct quotations I retain the spelling of the respective authors.
Table 1. *Entries for Kombosco in the Regional Lands Commission File Book on Land Documents in Upper East Region* (no data exists before 1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Land Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 (January–March)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Beo Rana is one of the few customary authorities in the Bolga area who combines the two positions of chief and earthpriest. The Beo Rana thus performs the various spiritual tasks in connection with use, transfer of, and litigation over land as well as occupying the political role of a gazetted chief with the relevant prerogatives. “I can drink from the calabash and wear the red fez,” has been the motto of the successive Beo Ranas, alluding to his double capacity as an earthpriest and a chief. The Beo Rana is Tallensi and as a chief he owes allegiance to the Tongo Rana of Tongo and, via him, to the Mamprusi paramount chief, and thereby not the paramount chief of Bolgatanga. The Beo Rana thus has customary political authority over his subjects in Beo and the alodial title to the land they occupy. However, in addition, the Beo Rana has also historically controlled the land as the earthpriest in neighboring communities – even communities that are not Tallensi and do not depend

---

12 In fact, the village of Beo was under the authority of the Ku-naba, one of the Mamprusi kings, the Nayiri’s dependencies, until 1910 when it was brought under Zuarungu as a way for the British to punish the Ku-naba. Later, in 1937, though, a similar maneuver to clip the wings of the Zuarungu chief, Beo was brought under the Tongo Rana and became part of the Tallensi group. Throughout, however, Beo remained dependent on the Mamprusi king and only shifted around between intermediary masters (personal communication and handwritten notes on “The History of Beo and Winkogo” (no date) and “The History of Kumbosego” (no date) from Christopher Asaare, amateur historian of Bolgatanga, 12 November 2002. See also Anafu, 1973.
politically on the Tongo Rana, but rather on the Bolganaba, the paramount chief of Bolgatanga. One of the most significant villages in this particular controversy is Kombosco on the outskirts of Bolga town.

In October 2002 President Kufuor had come to Bolga on an official visit, and during a speech he announced that two new districts were to be created in the Upper East Region. As one of these a Tallensi-Nabdam district was to be carved out of Bolgatanga District. This outcome was the culmination of a very long struggle for a district by the various political forces among the Tallensi and Namdam – in particular, the hometown associations, Tallensi Rock Union and Nabdam Literates’ Association. This situated the struggle over the lands in Kombosco in a larger arena with more powerful actors and more comprehensive agendas. Only weeks after the president’s speech in Bolga, the chief of Kombosco supported by the Bolganaba, sent a petition to the Regional Lands Commission for a change in the processing of land leases in their respective areas.

‘The change to be Beo Rana [who endorses leases] around 1998 [after the landmark court cases] has hampered significantly law and order in the sale of land in these areas and leave the Chiefs with little or no room to play their supervisory role on land matters. […] The Beo Rana politically and traditionally belong[s] to Tongo which is distinct from us and should not be principal signatory to leases and take royalties from one traditional area to another area. These […] villages’ chieftaincy is older than that of Beo-chieftaincy and chiefs of these […] areas are not enskinned by the Beo Rana. Villages that are being ruled by Tindaanas do not have Chiefs and the Tindaana is not contested for, but in the case of Beo Rana the Tongo Rana enskins him as a Chief. So Beo Rana is sub-Chief of Tongo and we can not allow a sub-Chief of another traditional area to rule over us.’

---

13 Local Government Act 462 (1[2]) of 1993 confers the powers to sign executive instruments to this effect on the president. Executive instruments must later be confirmed by Parliament.

14 The Tallensi area had previously been an administrative entity: Tallensi Native Authority (1940–58), Tallensi Local Council (1958–60), and Tallensi District Council (1960–66), until it was absorbed into the Frafra District (1966–88) and finally Bolgatanga District (since 1988). In 1983, however, the Bolgatanga District was divided into three electoral areas (Bolgatanga, Tallensi, and Nabdam) with a member of Parliament for each. For an account of “district making” in the Upper East, see Lentz (2006b).

15 Petition for the Change of the Processing of Lease of Land in Kumbosigo, Yargabisi and Dulugu Residential Area. Signed by the three chiefs and sent from the Bolganaba’s Palace, 14 October 2002. Unarchived material in private possession.
This petition is telling for the chiefs’ approach. First of all, the petition neatly places land matters with the chiefs. As chiefs, village and paramount chiefs respectively, the authors of the petition would prefer to see the Beo Rana in his capacity of a chief also. It would be evident that a Tallensi chief from Tongo, drawing his authority from the Tongo Rana and ultimately from the paramount chief of the Mamprusi, could not claim any authority over chiefs from the Bolgatanga Traditional area who draw their authority from the paramount Bolganaba. Since the Bolganaba’s emancipation from the Mamprusi chief, the village chief of Kombosco did not “share overlord” with the Beo Rana. Moreover, the petition plays the ethnic card in anticipation of the new district: Tongo is “distinct from us.” The Beo Rana did not delay his rebuttal. In a petition to the Regional Lands Commission he argued that

‘the Beo Rana has from time immemorial been the Tindana (Landowner) of all Beo Traditional lands before the advent of the institution of Chieftaincy in the Beo Traditional Area of authority. . . . That the conferment of chieftaincy . . . did not operate to vest in such individuals paramount or Allodial title to lands settled on by the inhabitants of the said areas. That the Beo Rana was similarly conferred with Chiefship in addition to his already existing customary office of Tindana in which office was and is as at date vested with the Paramount or Allodial title to all lands of the Beo Rana. . . . That the Beo Rana acquired the entire large stretch of land which includes […] Kumbosgo […], and [others] by virtue of first settlement and occupation and exercised unrestrained and uninterrupted rights of allodial ownership of Beo Rana’s lands and particularly of late over the lands settled on by the people of […] Kumbosgo […] as at date.’¹⁶

There was no immediate written response, but soon land leases were being endorsed by the Kombosco chief without consultation with the Beo Rana. The Kombosco chief argued that he (or his father) had previously endorsed leases for land in Kombosco. Leases do, indeed, exist, signed by the Kombosco chief; however, the capacity in which he signed is unclear – whether representing the Beo Rana in this act or acting autonomously as the chief and the allodial titleholder.

During the first years after Rawlings’ second coup d’État in 1982, the political rhetoric was in favour of the ‘downtrodden and exploited’, and the political apparatus dominated by

¹⁶ Re: Petition for the Change of the Processing of Lease of Land in Kumbosigo, Yargabisi and Dulugu Residential Area. Signed by the Beo Rana. 13 November 2002. Unarchived material in private possession.
radicals (Nugent, 1995). Emboldened by this atmosphere of revolution and reversals, some earthpriests began to sign and endorse leases to land. The unpredictability of the regime made the chiefs lie low. Thus, for some years both the earthpriests and the chiefs signed and endorsed leases as if the land was their property. However, although the revolutionary period allowed the earthpriests to voice their interests, the administration was hardly operating. Therefore it never recognized the earthpriests’ claims or effectively dismissed those of the chiefs. During the first years, 1982-83, the land administration was virtually suspended; until 1997 the National Lands Commission did not operate on a regional level, and the local communities were not granted any representation. In this open--ended situation, both sides, the chiefs and the earthpriests, attempted to institutionalize their claims of ownership. Both sides endorsed land leases.

By 2002, however, the landmark court cases establishing the earthpriests as allodial landowners had long had an effect on the thinking of the earthpriests, and by the end of November of that year, the Beo Rana had sued the chief of KomboSCO “for and on behalf of the entire people of KomboSCO.” From that day, the processing of land leases from KomboSCO was suspended. The case is still pending to the best of my knowledge.

While the Beo Rana’s claim was essentially based on his identity as earthpriest and his origination in the first settlement, the KomboSCO chief’s defense was based on different categories of identity, namely ethnicity, which had recently been introduced with the imminent creation of the Tallensi-Nabdam District. The chief and his solicitor wanted a trial to determine “whether or not ethnicity is a criterion or factor in the determination of allodial title ownership of land under customary law.” Whereas the Beo Rana argued in terms of a tradition from “time immemorial,” or at least well before the creation of chiefs, the claims of the chief of KomboSCO and the Bolganaba were a little more complex. They not only argued that the concerned village’s chieftaincy was senior to that of Beo but also alluded, arguing in terms of ethnicity, to some of the historical events that separated the Tallensi from the other Frafras, namely the Bolganaba’s emancipation from the Mamprusi paramount. This

---

17 Interview with Regional Director of Lands Commission Upper East Region, Mr. Bakari Nyari (13 March 2002).
18 Writ of suit between Tindana of Beo and Chief of KomboSCO, 26 November 2002 (suit no 17/2002) High Court of Bolgatanga; Statement of Claim, 14 April 2003; Summons for Directions, 27 May 2003; Amended Statement of Defence and Counter Claim, 6 November 2003; Reply to Amended Statement of Defence and Counter Claims, 23 December 2003; and Notice of Additional Issues, 2 March 2004.
19 People could still enter the File Book for Land Documents (see Table 1), but the effective processing of leases was interrupted.
20 Notice of Additional Issues, 2 March 2004 (suit no 17/2002) High Court of Bolgatanga.
emancipation meant that the vassals of the emancipated Bolganaba – e.g. Kombosco – could not be controlled by a vassal of the now abandoned Mamprusi.

This attempt to resituate the area of Kombosco and Beo in terms of traditional authority, land jurisdiction, and administrative areas was not the first. As early as 1931 when closing down Zuarungu as an administrative station was proposed, the commissioner of the Northern Province suggested that the Nabdams would go into Bawku District, the Nankannis into Navrongo District, and the Tallensi into South Mamprusi District. He immediately received a reply from the district commissioner in Zuarungu, who, in addition to an understandable reluctance to be “closed down,” argued that splitting up the area according to traditional areas would be anything but simple.

“A more formidable difficulty, however, is the absence of recognised boundaries between most of the chiefdoms which is the cause to-day of many disputes. I had certainly hoped to devote much time after Christmas to demarcating the boundaries and deciding the extent of the domains of the various chiefs, but even if this is satisfactorily done I think your proposal will cause a great deal of confusion and discomfort among the people generally.”

The high commissioner of the Northern Province flatly refused this argument, responding in a series of numbered paragraphs:

“3. I cannot see why the proposed arrangement should “cause a great deal of confusion and discomfort among the people generally.” Only a very small percentage of them will realise any change has taken place. 4. I cannot for one moment accept your statement that there are no

---

21 NRG 8/2/17. No mention was made of a distinct people speaking the dialect of Bolgatanga (grueni), and Bolgatanga did not figure at all as a town of any importance. See Bening (1974; 1975: 127).
22 He thus argued in terms of the existing administrative collaboration with chiefs; with the fortunate geographical location of Zuarungu, and with the existing infrastructure: “It seems to me that it will be a pity suddenly to close down Zuarungu station; it possesses several quite good buildings, notably a brand new prison with cell accommodation superior, I believe, to any in the province. . . . I am sending this letter by special runner as I want you to see it before you meet Mr. Mckay.” Letter from Zuarungu District Commissioner Page, 10 October 1931. NRG 8/2/17.
23 Letter from Zuarungu District Commissioner Page to Commissioner of Northern Province, 10 October 1931. NRG 8/2/17.
recognised boundaries. They must be told to settle them at an early date; WE CANNOT DO IT FOR THEM, and they well know what they are. I will discuss this with you later.\footnote{Letter from Commissioner of Northern Province to Zuarungu District Commissioner, 13 October 1931. NRG 8/2/17.}

The district commissioner must have felt very strongly about his argument, as he ventured to persevere against his superior officer:

‘With reference to your paragraph 4 I cannot agree either that the chiefs know their boundaries or that they can settle them. I repeat that there are in many cases no recognised boundaries between chiefdoms. There are generally known boundaries between the various tindanas [earthpriests] but it is quite common – & permissible since the chiefs have no control over the land – for the tindana following the chief of A to grant land to followers of the chief of B. These people still continue to follow the chief of B, and although the chief of A will probably agree to this in theory, in practice, as is to be expected, it is a fruitful cause of dispute between the chiefs. We are the only people who can settle the boundaries and make rules for the future disposal of the land, I cannot see why the chiefs here should be expected to be capable of settling them for themselves when in the Colony with much longer established chiefdoms these disputes are often taken to the Privy Council for decision.’\footnote{Letter from Zuarungu District Commissioner Page to Commissioner of Northern Province, 22 October 1931. NRG 8/2/17.}

Much more contemporary competing maps had, however, seen the light of day in the process of lobbying for the Tallensi-Nabdam District.\footnote{The Nabdam Literate’s Association was formed in 1962 (NRG 8/2/138). Tallensi Rock Union was founded in 1992 (\textit{A Brief Report on Tallensi Rock Union}, no date). Unarchived material in private possession. Both associations lobbied for the creation of the districts and the development of their respective areas (see also Lentz, 1995).} In 2001 the Tallensi Traditional Council, regrouping village chiefs of the Tallensi area and the Paramount chief, the Tongo Rana (supported by \textit{Tallensi Rock Union}), the Member of Parliament for the Tallensi electoral area, assemblymen, and opinion leaders forwarded the latest in a series of petitions for the creation of a district to President Kufuor.\footnote{Petition for the Creation of Tallensi District, forwarded by Tallensi Traditional Council, 15 September 2001. Unarchived material in private possession.} In order to qualify for a district, the government, through the Electoral Commission, had to assess a number of criteria. \textit{Population size} and
existing infrastructure are quite straightforward, whereas ethnic homogeneity and land mass are somewhat more open for interpretation. The petition from Tallensi Traditional Council included a few maps, one of which proposed the geographical outline of a future Tallensi District. This proposal was based roughly on the existing electoral areas established in 1983 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sketch of new district boundaries, Source: Petition for the Creation of Talensi District.

---

28 Interview with Regional Director of Electoral Commission, Bolgatanga, 29 March 2004.
As Tallensi Rock Union stated, these were the most innocuous boundaries and just served the purpose of “getting” the district. Later, when boundaries were to be established concretely, the government would use “natural boundaries.”

When President Kufuor announced the creation of the district in 2002, the fine lines of the boundaries remained to be settled. By “natural boundaries” the Tallensi petitioners – and, in particular, Tallensi Rock Union – meant land “controlled by the Tallensi people.” This area could include land in Kombosco as well as other villages in the area. One notices that Beo is comfortably situated within the proposed district. The intention of the Tongo-Beo protagonists thus seemed to be to base future political territorial claims on existing recognized property rights. These rights were, in turn, based on a notion of the past as an inveterate source of mores, interrupted only by the invention of chiefs and their fabricated claims to land. If this line of reasoning was to prevail, however, it meant that the ever pending court case over the allodial title in Kombosco would be crucial. The dispute between Beo and Kombosco was already common knowledge, and as the various ideas about possible interpretations of “natural boundaries” for the new district percolated through Bolgatanga, big men with interests in what would become the decimated Bolgatanga District at heart reacted.

Attack is the superior defense. Instead of merely insisting on the electoral boundaries dividing the current Bolgatanga District into the Bolga, Tallensi, and Nabdam constituencies, the district chief executive of Bolgatanga District and other dignitaries from the town began to lobby with communities in the Tallensi Constituency to get them to join the new Bolgatanga District, and thus reduce the size of the future Tallensi-Nabdam District. Efforts were particularly directed against people of the village of Gono in the northernmost section of Beo bordering Kombosco. When Beo in 1938 was transferred from Zuarungu to Tongo, Gono was part of the package and had become part of Tallensi Constituency. Though speaking the dialect of Bolgatanga, its people had subsequently engaged in Tallensi festivals and celebrations. However, for the past six years the people of Gono had resumed the observance of the festivals of the people of Bolga as well. The people of Gono had taken advantage of living in a border zone by ensuring their adaptability to both sides, keeping options open in the event of opportunities. The district chief executive’s choice of Gono was in all likelihood

---

29 Interview with the President of Tallensi Rock Union, John Zoogah, 8 November 2001 and 27 November 2004.
30 Thus, when members of a party from the DCE’s office were “intercepted” in Beo, it caused a stir as it was believed that they were effectively marking out the boundaries in the landscape. They argued that it was merely a routine visit, but the atmosphere of the day did not favor this kind of interpretation. Interview with District Coordinating Director, Nong-Inga Nsor N’yabir, 29 March 2004.
motivated by more than its plastic ethnic compatibility with Bolga, however. A fair amount of
government infrastructure is situated in Gono, and although much of it is redundant.\textsuperscript{31} Future
compensation for non-legal acquisition of land with the government was promising in the
area. The chief and elders of Gono were in favor of the plan and expeditiously organized an
“emergency meeting” on 27 December 2003. Here, a petition against the inclusion of Gono
community in the new Tallensi-Nabdam District was prepared and sent to the district chief
executive for his lobbying with the Ministry of Local Government.\textsuperscript{32} The petition suggested
that the new district boundary should separate Gono from Beo, placing Gono and its
infrastructure in the future Bolga District.

Apparently, this just furthered the ambition and appetite of the district chief executive.
Hence, during a meeting with the representatives of the new district in early 2004, another
map was produced by the executive and his administration, situating not only Gono but even
Beo proper well within the future Bolga District.\textsuperscript{33} This map did not go down well with the
participants, and the meeting ended inconclusively (see Figure 2).

\textsuperscript{31} Such as the old Agricultural Station, the meat factory, etc.
\textsuperscript{32} Petition against the Inclusion of Gono Community in the Newly Created Tallensi/Nabdam District, 29
December, 2003. Sent from the Gono Chief Palace and signed by the chief, elders, heads of families, and
representatives of The Gono Youth Association. Unarchived material in private possession.
\textsuperscript{33} The map also placed the large Nabdam village of Dachio within Bolga District.
The spatial strategy of the Bolgatanga-based litigants was virtually the opposite of the Tallensi group. Here, the ambition was to base property claims on recognized territorial divisions. If the territorial divisions would separate Beo from Kombosco (or draw both into Bolga District) the Beo Rana’s claim could be seen as an unwarranted, and hence weak, territorial vindication. This argument, of space as territory, depended on the notion of the past as history, where the fortunate event of the establishment of a new district combined with the historical and much deserved emancipation of the Chief of Bolgatanga from the Mamprusis and the subsequent sequestration of land rights from the Beo Rana. For this line of argument
to be successful, a favorable settlement of territorial boundaries was crucial.\textsuperscript{34} To the best of my knowledge, this decision, too, is pending.

Thus, while the creation of the Tallensi-Nabdam District was now a legal and political fact, the exact geographical contours and their territorial and property implications were still for some time to come dependent on the performance of political and legal acts, and how the past was most successfully invoked.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The contemporary construction of the past and, as a frequent corollary, the representation of cultural identity has been crucial for the successful vindication of political rights in Bolgatanga. However, more than a single past has proved potentially valid as a claim for land and office. When arguments of the past, confronting \textit{tradition} with \textit{history}, intertwined with competing projections of legitimate forms of control over space, complex combinations of claims have emerged.

While the competition over chieftaincy and land depends on the framing of the past, success has equally hinged on fortuitous or clever readings of the structures of opportunity. Strategic, or open, moments have arisen from time to time. Changes of government, adoption of a new constitution and tenure reforms, decentralization policies and the creation of new administrative boundaries, and government policies relating to taxation or chieftaincy have all, in isolation or in combination, created openings for a rearrangement of political rights and positions. The competition can be quite intense in such moments. The contestants seem to be aware that, while rights and offices are essentially negotiable, certain moments are highly propitious for change, whereas other times seem to favor reproduction. Consequently, “socially constructed” does not necessarily mean ephemeral or weak. Once successfully constructed, the past, identity, and rights become markers for the future negotiation of society. Such settlements may stick for some time, and the “stickiness” of certain structured situations is related to the institutions involved in the competition. Whether the past was argued in terms of history or tradition, and whether space was seen in territorial terms or as property,

\textsuperscript{34} In case the “maximum option” presented by the DCE, including Beo in Bolgatanga District, was to be endorsed, the Beo Rana as a Tallensi would be in a difficult political position to defend his claims in a district dominated by people with ethnic allegiance to Bolgatanga.
legitimization was sought through a validation of claims by the state, the government, or other official institutions.

The analogy between space and the past may at first sight not seem entirely satisfactory. Unlike the two pasts, both territory and property are, in principle, clearly bounded, and both are ultimately political in the sense that their existence rests on the exercise of power, by a state or some other controlling agency. However, the tensions between the two strategies and between political and legal institutions demonstrate that, while both are ultimately political, they are not identical modern forms of controlling space. Moreover, the boundedness of territory and property by a state or other controlling agency presupposes their control. As the paper demonstrates, such control is sometimes precarious. This distinction can become blurred by constitutional provisions and social practices that link allodial title to chiefly jurisdiction. The categories can slide into and even become one another: territory may be a step toward ownership of land while ownership of land may be a step toward territorial control. Governors may indeed claim to own, and owners may very well pretend to govern.

The present validation of the past and the preferred projection of legitimate spatial control represent debate, friction, and competition between various institutions of public authority and interest groups. The Traditional Council, the House of Chiefs and the earthpriests’ association, the Regional Lands Commission and the Electoral Commission, hometown associations and the district chief executive and his administration, and the High Court all provide a functional semantic terrain for time and space (see Lund 2008). Command over this terrain is coveted by individuals such as chiefs and earthpriests and by people with ambition to gain access to their offices, as well as by the very institutions that provide the conventional elements of how to debate time and space. Although neither the past nor space seems to be distinguished by infinite plasticity, there seems to be sufficient semantic scope for fluidity to characterize them. Opportunities will in all likelihood continue to emerge. To seize the day, one must be able to seize yesterday, preferably in a form that resonates with tomorrow’s spatial ambition.
References

Public Records & Archives Administration Department, Regional Office, Tamale
NRG 8/1 Series: Land
NRG 8/2 Series: Chieftaincy and Native Affairs
NRG 8/3 Series: Reports
NRG 8/4 Series: Informal Diaries
NRG 8/5 Series: Minutes

Unofficial sources
Many people have kept copies of letters, reports, newspaper clippings, petitions and minutes of meetings and I have only encountered trust and generosity as people let me make copies of their ‘private archives’. Such sources are not indexed with archival reference numbers, but I have specified the nature of the documents in the footnotes.

Other references
Crook, R., 1987, ‘Legitimacy, authority and the transfer of power in Ghana.’ Political Studies no. 35. Pp. 552–72


Lentz, C., 2006b, ‘Decentralization, the state and conflicts over local boundaries in Northern Ghana.’ Development and Change vol. 37, no. 4. Pp. 901–919


