

The Copyright Law of the United States (17 U.S.C. 101 et seq. as amended) limits the use of this material to **Instructional Use**.

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Publisher \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Course \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor \_\_\_\_\_

## **Coexistence and Reconciliation in the Northern Region of Ghana**

**Hizkias Assefa**

This chapter is a case study of a region in Northern Ghana torn apart by ethnic conflict and the efforts to restore and rebuild a peaceful coexistence. It illustrates a peacebuilding methodology that this author has developed over the past decade from experiences in a number of countries engulfed in civil war and has come to call "Process of Expanding and Deepening Engagement." The methodology offers insights into the interrelationship between the concepts of justice and reconciliation and provides an approach for attaining both objectives in large-scale conflict.<sup>1</sup>

### **Background to the Conflict—The Guinea Fowl War**

The Northern Region, one of the six administrative regions of Ghana, covers almost a third of the country's land area and is inhabited by eighteen ethnic groups. In February 1994 a quarrel erupted in a small town between a man from the Konkomba ethnic group and another from the Nanumba group over the purchase of a guinea fowl, which eventually led to the killing of the Nanumba man. Almost immediately rumors began to fly that Konkombas had attacked Nanumbas. What had begun as a fight between two persons quickly engulfed two ethnic groups in armed conflict. Soon whole villages were aflame. Armed conflict had erupted in Northern Ghana four times since 1980, but this was to become the most devastating.

The conflict rapidly drew in other ethnic communities. The Dagombas and Gonjas, traditional allies of the Nanumbas, sided with them while the Basare,

Nawuri, and Nchumuru joined in on the side of the Konkombas. By the time the war was over, according to some estimates close to ten thousand people were dead.<sup>2</sup> Schools, clinics, and development projects estimated to be worth millions of dollars were destroyed. At least 423 villages were burnt or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Some towns were "ethnically cleansed." The conflict left over 135,000 internally displaced people, out of an estimated population of close to 700,000 for the entire region.<sup>4</sup>

## Issues of the Conflict

Traditionally, the social structure in the Northern Region has been divided into chiefly and acephalous societies. The former have organized themselves around hereditary chieftaincy structures that have a hierarchy from lower level chiefs to divisional chiefs, paramount chiefs, and even some that are superior to paramount chiefs who act like kings. Four ethnic groups, Dagombas, Nanumbas, Gonjas, and Mamprusis, organize themselves this way. The acephalous groups, such as the Konkombas, Nawuris, Basares, and Nchumurus, are segmentary societies that have not had hierarchical structures such as chiefs and chieftaincies.<sup>5</sup> To a very large extent they are migratory yam farmers who settle on a land and till it until it becomes less fertile, at which time they move on to other areas where the land has lain fallow for some time.

In most of the Northern Region, the traditional land tenure practice has not recognized individual ownership of land. Land ownership, to a very large extent, has been vested in paramount chiefs and is held in trust or on behalf of the ethnic groups to which the chief belongs. This, therefore, has restricted land ownership to the chiefly groups. These groups argue that they were the original settlers who allowed the acephalous groups migrating from other areas to settle on their land and farm there by permission. For this permission, the settlers pay tribute to the chiefs, although in many instances the tribute has become more and more symbolic.

The acephalous groups have resented the monopoly of land ownership in the hands of the chiefly peoples as well as the tribute that they are required to pay. Some of the acephalous people refer back to the sixteenth century to justify their claim that *they* were actually the indigenous people in the area and were invaded by the chiefly groups, who then took over the land and imposed their rule on them. The acephalous people insist on the creation of their own paramount chieftaincy that can hold land in trust for them.

Hidden under the issues of chieftaincy and title for land are deep resentments based on perceptions of economic and political inequalities, social and cultural prejudices, and competition for limited resources. Moreover, the era of multiparty politics in Ghana has made population a sensitive issue. The population of some of the acephalous people has been increasing rapidly, and this has meant more demand for representation in national and regional politics. This was threatening traditional authority in the area, which was based on ethnicity

and control of land. To complicate issues further, religion also played a role in reinforcing the fault lines in the conflict. The leadership of the acephalous groups is predominantly Christian, having close connections with Western churches and missionaries, while the chiefly groups are primarily Muslim. Therefore, development or humanitarian assistance from Muslim countries to the Muslim population in Northern Ghana, or Bible translations in the local languages and vigorous distributions of these Bibles, fed into the fear of expansion of one religion at the expense of the other.

## Government Response

Soon after the outbreak of the war in February 1994, the central government sent in the military to quell the conflict. Although the intervention was effective in stopping the fighting, in some instances the soldiers were drawn into the conflict and created more disaffection in certain areas. In April 1994 a high-level government commission, called the Permanent Peace Negotiation Team (PPNT), was appointed to mediate peace in the conflict area. The mediation effort did not make much progress, because the chiefly groups insisted on an acknowledgment of responsibility and apology from the acephalous groups before negotiations could begin, which the latter were unwilling to do. Although a cease-fire agreement was signed under the auspices of the PPNT in June 1994, unfortunately another armed confrontation was in the making.

Following the 1994 war, Konkombas who had to pass through Nanumba towns to go to hospitals, government offices, and other such public places were harassed, and a few were ambushed and killed by Nanumbas. This unleashed festering hostility and anger caused by the last war, and the Konkombas attacked, killing eighteen Nanumbas. The Nanumbas retaliated by attacking a Konkomba town, destroying it and killing its chief along with a number of Konkombas. The war immediately spread to a number of surrounding towns and villages. By the time the government military forces intervened and stopped it, about 150 people were killed, 14 villages were burnt, over 18,000 heads of cattle were looted, and about 21,000 people became displaced. Victims of the 1994 war who were just starting to rehabilitate themselves became victims again. Many say that they could have predicted that the March 1995 war would break out, since the skirmishes between the Konkombas and Nanumbas had been increasing and tension was mounting. But the agencies responsible for looking into these matters allegedly did not heed the warnings of the impending crisis.

## Beginning of the NGO Peacebuilding Process

Several development nongovernmental (NGOs) operating in the conflict areas were concerned that not only much of the infrastructure they had built was destroyed but that the continuation of their work was rendered impossible due to the perpetuation of the conflict. So they formed a consortium<sup>6</sup> to develop collaborative responses to the problems they were facing. One of the consortium members approached this author requesting assistance in the reestablishment of peace in the Northern Region of Ghana. At that time, the author was Director of a Kenyan organization called Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI). Based on that request, the author and a colleague, Emmanuel Bombande, a program officer at NPI and a Ghanaian himself, left for Ghana in November 1994 to work with the consortium in order to develop a response to the conflict situation as well as to facilitate the peacebuilding work that might be necessary. Our first task was to assess, firsthand, the situation in the conflict-torn region.

### Preliminary Explorations

During the first visit, we had extensive consultation with NGO representatives working in the conflict areas, church leaders, national level leaders of the youth associations of the conflicting ethnic groups,<sup>7</sup> government officials and ministers, and UN and other international agencies that were operating in the area or were engaged in providing humanitarian assistance. We visited the PPNT to learn what the team was doing and how NGOs might contribute to strengthen its initiative. It seemed that the PPNT was not eager to be associated with the exploration we were undertaking, but they cautioned us indirectly that we should move very carefully since the situation was very delicate.

We toured the conflict areas and held public and private discussions with opinion leaders, paramount chiefs, district government officials, and various other people in the ethnic communities. It seemed that many of the actors were touched by the fact that Africans from another part of the continent had come to assist in resolving problems in Northern Ghana, and they received us with warmth and openness. Some of the discussions resembled town meetings. Not only the opinion leaders but also the general public came to tell us, sometimes in very moving ways, their stories about the conflict, the causes for it, the extent of their losses, and the sense of betrayal they felt from the other ethnic group with whom they had intermarried and shared their lives. The public meetings enabled us to hear directly from the people, allowing us to gather the various groups' prevailing perceptions about the conflict and of each other. The trust level we enjoyed among the people we visited allowed us to use these meetings not only to learn about the different views, but also to share with our audiences what we learned from the other ethnic groups about *their* perceptions of the causes and dynamics of the conflict. When circumstances allowed, we also used the

meetings to challenge each group's perceptions of its adversaries' intentions and behavior as well as inject some conflict resolution concepts and approaches that we thought might be useful in laying down some ideas for future work.

We also visited divisional and paramount chiefs in their respective palaces, where they held court to gather the chiefs, subchiefs, elders, youth association leaders, and ordinary people from the communities to give us an opportunity to hear their stories. Most of the youth associations (which are organized along ethnic lines) had been active in the mobilization of people for the war effort by raising money (some called it war tax), recruiting fighters, and leading attacks and counterattacks.

The overriding message from many of our interactions during the visit was that the Konkombas and their allies had always been the aggressors, that they could no longer be trusted, and hence reconciliation with them was not possible. The youth associations from the chiefly groups demanded that the Konkombas and their allies acknowledge their faults, ask pardon from their former landlords, and pay compensation to the victims of their atrocities. They insisted that the Konkombas must acknowledge that they were settlers and abandon their demand for paramount chieftaincy. Some of the leaders brought in the religious dimension by indicating that meaningful agreement with those who did not share faiths was not possible.

These series of meetings and interactions were valuable opportunities for us to identify people who would be helpful in beginning to build bridges between these communities. Although most of the stories we heard were one-sided, usually presenting one side's grievances and hurt, portraying the other side as evil, and holding the other side responsible for the atrocities, there were a few people in every community who would acknowledge that there were some neighbors from the enemy group who offered them some protection or came to their aid when they needed assistance. We felt that some of those people would be the bridge-builders, and we talked with them in detail after the public meetings were over in order to discuss the conflict in more depth and obtain their commitment for the continuation of the discussion that had started.

We identified four people, elders and other influential people, from each of the four communities (sixteen in all) and invited them to attend a low-key consultation meeting under the pretext of "providing advice to development NGOs operating in the war-ravaged areas on how they could continue with their development work." The meeting was held in Kumasi, the capital of Ghana's Central Region, in May 1995. Kumasi was chosen because it was perceived to be a neutral site for all the conflict parties.

### The Kumasi Meeting

Although the meeting was billed as a consultation between the invited participants and the NGOs, the real intention of the gathering was to give the participants a platform to talk about an issue (development) that seriously

concerned all of them, and thereby use the opportunity to develop a common understanding of the conflict and the problems underlying it. The atmosphere upon arrival was very tense. There was no mingling among the participants across conflict lines, even at the meal tables. The Konkombas apparently felt outnumbered by the twelve people from the coalition of their adversary groups and were fearful. Later we were told that the four Konkombas slept in one room to protect each other.

Although we had called our meeting a consultation on development, it seemed that the parties came to do battle. The Konkombas were blamed for aggression and held responsible for the damages by the other groups. We organized the meetings in such a way that each group had an opportunity to tell the others how it perceived the conflict and how it suffered from it. The aim was to have the others hear the perspectives of their adversaries and eventually come up with some common definitions and understandings of the conflict and its dynamics. As outsiders to the conflict, we as facilitators also shared our observations about what we had heard and gathered from our tours of the conflict areas. Together, we analyzed the consequences of the conflict in great depth and what it had done to them as individuals and to their communities. There was a deep sense of loss and mourning about what happened.

A discussion then followed about the role that elders had played in conflict resolution in other parts of Africa where we have worked and observed. As a way of deepening the discussion, a reflection on reconciliation based on a monograph that this author had written, called "Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm," followed, which led to an exploration of the spiritual and secular understandings of reconciliation, the implications of these understandings, and what reconciliation might look like in the conflict situations in Northern Ghana. Both the Muslim and Christian participants began to share their respective understandings of the concept of reconciliation and discovered many commonalities about how it should be approached. Some of the challenges of reconciliation discussed in our formal sessions were apparently brought up repeatedly and discussed informally following the daily prayer sessions among the Muslim participants.

The Konkomba representatives, by and large, were younger than the other participants were, and since none of them was a chief, they enjoyed less prestige. This worked against them at the beginning. The chiefs talked down to the Konkombas, and the conversation was one-sided. But as the meeting progressed, particularly after our discussion of reconciliation, there was a change in the style of interaction. One prominent divisional chief apologized for the way he had been addressing the Konkomba representatives, pleaded with them to talk openly about their grievances against the three other groups, and requested that the others listen with sincerity. This changed the environment and gave the Konkombas time to detail their perceptions and complaints. The others listened with patience. In fact, whenever anyone from the chiefly groups would intervene to respond to the Konkomba allegations, the chiefs would censure the individual so that the Konkombas were not interrupted. Before this encounter,

there had not been an opportunity for the chiefly groups to hear directly from the Konkombas about why the war erupted and how the Konkombas had suffered from it; nor was there opportunity for the Konkombas to hear directly from the chiefly groups about the material devastation and psychological damage that they had caused. One respected elder from the chiefly groups pointed out that there was enough fault on the side of everybody involved, and he suggested that all of them confess their disastrous roles and seek pardon from each other. He began indicating some things that other ethnic groups had done to the Konkombas that might have contributed to the conflict.

The hostile environment that existed at the beginning of the meeting was changing. The participants began to mingle and eat together. Both Muslim and Christian prayers were being offered at the beginning and end of our daily meetings. The adversaries began to sit with each other instead of in their separate corners. There seemed to be a great sense of relief among participants that it was not only possible to be in the same room with the enemy, but to talk in a candid and constructive way with each other. At the end of the meeting, the adversary groups affirmed that dialogue was possible, that the process begun here in Kumasi must continue and include more people. The participants committed themselves to working together to become bridge builders among the four ethnic communities.

The most important accomplishments of the Kumasi meeting were the changes in the protagonists' perception that there were some trustworthy people in the enemy camps; that the resolution of the problem must come by acknowledging each group's responsibility in the conflict, including one's own; that the adversaries would work together to avoid the repeat of the damages of the past; and that such collaboration was possible. A Peace and Reconciliation Follow-up Committee was created to continue the peace efforts begun in the Kumasi meeting, which came to be called Kumasi I.

The committee was made up of two participants from each of the four groups. It was agreed that the committee would work as follows:

- a. Every committee member would go back to his or her respective ethnic community and find ways of sharing the insights gained from the Kumasi experience.
- b. Where possible, public meetings would be organized to discuss the need for and possibility of peace with the opposing ethnic groups (which later on came to be called Peace Awareness-Raising meetings).
- c. To the extent that it was safe, committee members from the adversary ethnic groups would be invited to the Peace Awareness meetings, so that people could see that there were elders even from the enemy group who were prepared to work for peace.
- d. Committee members would identify people from the conflict region who should be invited to a follow-up meeting would be identified in order to advance the dialogue process that had just begun.

As a way of advancing the conclusions of Kumasi further, it was decided that a second meeting should be organized for district youth association leaders, chiefs, some influential opinion leaders, and district administrators from all the ethnic groups. The intention was to begin working at the local level and slowly move step by step to the district, regional, and then the national levels.

Unfortunately, just near the end of the meeting, there were rumors that a new outbreak of hostilities was brewing between the Konkombas and Dagombas because of a letter apparently written by the Dagomba Traditional Council calling the Konkombas aliens with no land rights in the area and, therefore, no right for paramount chieftaincy. Stopping this possible outbreak of violence became the first challenge for the peace and reconciliation follow-up committee. The fear was that if violence broke out this time, it might be even more destructive. People had vowed not to be victims again and had armed themselves. The senior Dagomba chief in the meeting took the matter up with the Traditional Council members and persuaded them to retract the letter, if indeed the letter was official. In the meantime, the Konkomba committee members, who also were leaders in the Konkomba Youth Association, quickly returned to their communities and began talking with different influential members of their communities. They urged people to remain calm, as a new outbreak would only make the situation worse. They also indicated that a new dialogue process had started with the chiefly people that might find ways for addressing grievances. Fortunately, as a result of these measures, the feared violence was averted.

The facilitating team revisited the conflict areas and shared the outcomes of the Kumasi meetings with people who were thought to be able to help move the process forward.

## Kumasi II

Upon their return, the Kumasi participants began sharing their experience with other members of their respective communities. In the meantime, the follow-up committee had identified people to be invited to the next meeting. Those identified were individually approached and given a long and thorough explanation about the forthcoming meeting and the reason why they were chosen. Some of the youth association leaders said that they did not have a mandate from the national-level office to participate, but we insisted that they were invited because of their personal capacities and were not expected to make commitments on behalf of their organizations.

The Kumasi II meeting took place in September 1995 with about forty participants, including chiefs, district administrators, parliamentarians from the conflict areas, district-level youth association leaders, and opinion leaders. Here again, people who viewed each other with great hostility were brought face-to-face in a nonviolent atmosphere for the first time since the war. For the Nanumba participants the anger was still fresh, as it had only been a few months

since the last outbreak of war with the Konkombas. The successive outbreak of war in the area in such short intervals had made the normal governmental administrative functions in the area very difficult, if not impossible. Thus the invited district administrators, by virtue of their position, were very much interested in the quick resolution of the problems and took an active and constructive role throughout the meeting. The parliamentarians and youth association leaders seemed the most bitter and uncompromising.

The Kumasi II meeting used basically the same process as Kumasi I. Although this group was more difficult to handle, slowly the accusations and counteraccusations began to give way to allowing space for each other to talk and listen. There was an exploration of the spiritual dimension, especially after the presentation of "Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm," and both Muslims and Christians were acknowledging that in their respective faiths "reconciliation with God" implied reconciliation with other human beings. This kind of reconciliation required protagonists to go beyond pointing out the damage that their adversaries had done to them, to also recognizing and admitting the damage that they themselves had inflicted on their adversaries.

One Muslim youth association leader captured the spirit of these reflections when he narrated a personal story. He had been actively involved in the war by raising money and mobilizing people. He was very bitter about the betrayal and cruelty he had experienced from Konkomba neighbors with whom he had grown up. He said his bitterness had made it impossible for him to even go through his daily prayer rituals since the eruption of the 1994 war. Anger, hate, and revenge dominated his thoughts, making prayers difficult for him. He said he was able to pray for the first time since the war after participating in Kumasi II. We heard reports that after Kumasi II he created a group that assisted the follow-up committee's peace awareness-raising work in the conflict areas.

At the end of Kumasi II, many participants expressed astonishment that they found themselves in the same room with their adversaries talking about the possibilities of peace and what needed to be done to bring it about. Some participants expressed their feelings in the following ways:

"In these meetings, many of us saw our mistakes. Some of us would not even greet each other. We learned the need for self-criticism in conflict situations."

"From their statements at the beginning, there were people from all ethnic groups who were hardliners when they first arrived. They now seem to feel and think differently. This means that this meeting has touched base with most people."

"I learned to tolerate and accommodate the views of other people other than my ethnic affiliation. . . . If the approach of these meetings continues, we can see peace in sight."

"I got to understand the viewpoints and demands of my contenders. . . . Having understood the root causes and the demands of the other ethnic group, I can explain to my people how to begin to make compromises."

"I leaned that I have to live a life that in itself will portray me as a peacemaker. We the people who participated in these meetings will leave here and go back home as peacemakers. Our examples will help others understand the need for them to also come together to talk about their differences without using arms. Thank you facilitators. . . . Allah bless you all."

"I appreciated most a meeting which created very healthy grounds for Africans to respect their true image as created by God."

Like Kumasi I, this meeting's participants resolved that they would talk to their chiefs, youth leaders and followers, opinion leaders, and respective ethnic communities about their experiences in Kumasi and mobilize people for reconciliation. The next step in the process was to expand the reach of the discussion. We felt that a good foundation was being laid, so we could risk reaching out to more powerful elements to bring them into the process. The facilitators also decided to include members of some other ethnic groups who had been implicated in the conflict, such as the Nawuris, Nchumurus, and Basares.

As a result of Kumasi II, a number of things began to happen. The follow-up committee decided to intensify its peace awareness meetings and campaigns. It prepared posters and T-shirts with peace messages, to be distributed during its campaigns. Some of them read: "Human beings cause wars and human beings can end them. Let us end our wars now." "All of us are created in the image of God, let us honor one another." Peace workshops were organized in the district capitals of Bimbilla, Salaga, Yendi, Saboba, Tamale, and Gushegu, where the different ethnic representatives of the follow-up committee gathered to talk to people about the need for tolerance and peaceful coexistence, free movement of people, and the opening up of markets. They were able to reach a large number of people (chiefs, elders, and different population groups) and challenge people's perceptions by the mere fact that the committee was composed of members of ethnic groups that were supposed to be enemies but were now working together for peace. The district administrators and the youth association leaders who had been at Kumasi I and II also began talking to their superiors, chiefs, and paramount chiefs and organizing their own peace awareness meetings in a number of towns. Slowly these meetings began to change the attitudes of the adversaries and helped them reach out to each other.

As an outgrowth of the Kumasi meetings, two former enemies, the Konkomba and Dagomba youth associations, were able to come together to undertake some joint tasks, such as helping to identify cattle looted during the war and return them to their legal owners. Some tractors, bicycles, and other personal belongings confiscated during the war were also returned. In some towns Dagombas and Konkomba villagers were coming together to rebuild schools destroyed during the war. Some Konkomba traders were beginning to come to Dagomba markets in Yendi and return without being attacked. Similar movements were observed regarding some Dagomba traders going to Konkomba markets in Saboba. In the Nanumba areas, the local youth associations

organized meetings in four major towns, where they spoke with people about peaceful coexistence and encouraged the free movement of Konkombas as well as the resumption of trade between the two communities. The youth associations also began settling compensation claims between Konkombas and Nanumbas over looted cattle during the war. An agreement was reached between the Nanumba and Konkomba Youth Associations whereby Konkombas who had taken Nanumba land and houses while the Nanumbas were "in exile" were to return them to their previous owners immediately after harvesting the crops they had planted while the Nanumbas were away. Although on some fronts there were signs that the Kumasi process was beginning to have positive effects, progress on the Gonja-Konkomba front was facing difficulties.

## From Kumasi III to Kumasi VI

Subsequent meetings began to focus on different strata and sectors of the society.<sup>8</sup> Kumasi III focused on national-level youth association leaders, divisional chiefs (the chiefs immediately below the paramount chiefs), and delegates from ethnic groups that had so far not participated, such as the Basare, Nchumuru, and Nawuri ethnic groups. We also began targeting the more extreme elements of the conflict parties and began to work with them. Some of these people were prominent lawyers and civil servants who had been identified with strongly held positions against the adversary ethnic groups; others were people who were identified as having led attacks against the other ethnic communities.

At the time of invitation, some of these participants said that they would not attend such a meeting; others said they would come for a day or two to present their cases and leave. Those who came appeared with all sorts of documents and maps, government commission of inquiry reports, investigations and findings of British and German colonial authorities, legal briefs submitted to the PPNT, and so on, in support of their peoples' grievances and positions. However, the process caught the interest of these participants, and they stayed, and at the end of the meeting many commented that the scheduled four and a half days for the meeting was not enough. During the meeting, there was much self-criticism, even among the most entrenched national youth association leaders. They acknowledged that they were to blame for the havoc and disaster that ensued and that they could play important roles in healing the societies in Northern Ghana.

In Kumasi III, the Nawuri and Nchumuru representatives did a splendid job in presenting their cases. In the past, their grievances had not usually been well understood. Their presentations in Kumasi III, however, were enlightening and even moved some of the participants to tears. Some people from the chiefly groups began stating publicly that they knew about the Nchumuru and Nawuri grievances but did not understand the gravity of the hurt or the depth of the concern. A sense began to develop that some of the grievances could not be

ignored or avoided by legalistic sophistry and that everyone must collaborate to find solutions to these problems. People made repeated references to "conscience" as the guide to evaluating the claims, rather than the sophistication of the arguments. There were shared regrets about the damages the parties had inflicted on each other, and a realization that everyone ended up losing because of it. They detailed the damages suffered: the loss of close friendships, the breakup of ethnically mixed marriages, the horrors of the massacres, and destruction of the economic infrastructure, which had set development in the region back many years.

In the meantime, some specific NGO spin-offs from the Kumasi processes were beginning to take place. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) introduced peace education programs into the various Catholic Church dioceses in nine districts. Action Aid supported a joint Konkomba and Dagomba initiative to rebuild a school at a border area between the two communities, which required a great deal of communication and collaboration between them. The Ghana Council of Churches organized a number of reconciliation seminars, dialogue between Muslim and Christian youth organizations, interfaith prayer meetings, interethnic worship gatherings, and prayers at various locations in the conflict region.

Up to this time the peace process focused on laying the ground for peace in Northern Ghana. There was evidence that momentum toward consensus on the need for peace in the region was building. Increasingly, more and more people, even the extremist elements, were persuaded that dialogue and reconciliation were possible. It was felt that the time had come to go beyond this recognition and give a concrete definition to the kind of peace that the warring communities wanted in their region. So for Kumasi IV, we invited the delegates deputized by the conflicting parties to the PPNT mediation process (which had been attempted soon after the breakout of the war in 1994) to come together in order to arrive at a consensus definition of the issues of contention (building on the discussions, exchanges, and insights gained from the previous Kumasi meetings) and enter into a bilateral and multilateral negotiation process to seek solutions to the issues that underlay the war. In order to enhance the representativity and the mandate of each delegation, we asked that the original number of delegates to the PPNT be augmented by additional people who were respected, influential, and seen as good negotiators for the interests of their respective communities. Therefore, a number of outstanding women and lawyers were included in the teams.

In this meeting, we facilitated very intensive bilateral and multilateral negotiations among the delegates on the issues of the conflict. Each negotiation interaction came up with a set of agreements on identified issues of contention, except for the Gonjas and the Nawuris. The stipulations were then compiled in one common document, called the "Kumasi Draft Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in the Northern Region of Ghana."

So that the agreement would not freeze on paper, it was deemed important to keep it alive by giving it some institutional embodiment. An organization was

created that could capture the spirit of unity that was emerging and that could transcend the ethnocentric attitudes of the parties (identified by many participants as a major factor that had fueled the wars). The new organization was to be a multiethnic youth association composed of all the ethnic groups in the Northern Region, and it would focus on the common, overarching, and region-wide goals, concerns, and areas for cooperation. Among other things, it was decided that the new association would be charged with the following functions:

- Form peace committees to educate people in the region about tolerance and coexistence.
- Encourage free movement of people and commerce in the region.
- Create mechanisms for controlling rumors and misinformation that tend to create uncontrollable conflict situations.
- Develop ways for controlling the inflow of weapons into the region.<sup>9</sup>
- Be involved in the resettlement and reconstruction of the war-ravaged areas by mobilizing resources from NGOs as well as the government.
- Be a catalyst for the overall economic development of the Northern Region by galvanizing interest and assistance from inside and outside the country.

In order to ensure that the peace and reconciliation agreement that was just reached was something the overall society would identify with—rather than only those who participated in the Kumasi meetings—it was agreed that the document would be presented to the delegates' respective communities for extensive consultation and ratification. The delegates pledged to hold a series of meetings with chiefs, opinion leaders, youth associations, administrators, and the general public to invite discussion and comment on the draft agreement. The delegates also agreed to give each other one month for the consultation and then to come back with their feedback on the communities' reactions. In one instance the delegates reported that about five thousand people gathered at one place to discuss and comment on the draft agreements.

When the delegates returned for Kumasi V, they brought very strong support for the agreement from many sectors of their respective communities. However, they also came with amendments that required renegotiation of some of the stipulations in the draft agreement. Although the massive consultation process strengthened the legitimacy of the agreement by involving all the warring communities from the grassroots to the leadership levels, it also had the disadvantage of reducing the delegates' flexibility in the renegotiation process. Once the consulted constituencies demanded certain changes, the hands of the delegates were tied. It became difficult for the delegates to make any concessions. Thus, the negotiation of the amendments became even more difficult than the negotiation of the draft agreement. We began confronting deadlocks on a number of counts. After an excruciating process, the renegotiations were completed, and all the parties came up with the final agreement, which was called the Kumasi Accord on Peace and Reconciliation Between the Ethnic Groups in

the Northern Region of Ghana. On March 30, 1996, all the parties signed the accord, and it became the official peace agreement, ending the hostilities between the warring ethnic groups and proposing new ways of governing their relationships with one another.

It was felt that the Kumasi Accord should be presented to the Northern Regional Administration as the government agency responsible for the peace and security of the region, and from whom we had received a great deal of assistance in terms of security and logistics during the peacebuilding process. We felt that through the regional minister, the accord could also be presented to top-level government officials, including the president of the Republic, for their official blessing as well as commitment for the great rehabilitation effort needed in the area to reinforce the peace accord.

Kumasi VI followed in October 1996. Here, all of the youth association leaders of the Northern Region debated and approved the draft constitution for the new organization, which was called Northern Ghana Youth and Development Association (NORYDA). Some referred to NORYDA as a "new structuring of political life in the Northern Region." In this meeting, we tried to identify the training needs for the NORYDA members so that they would be in a position to sustain the peacebuilding process. In the meantime, the NGO consortium undertook an assessment trip on how to rehabilitate the Northern Region now that a peace accord was signed and the participants were showing their resolve to stick to it. In December 1996, Ghana's second national elections took place. It is interesting to note that some of the people who were active in the Kumasi peace processes made "peace and development in Northern Ghana" their campaign platform, and some of them were elected into office. One even became cabinet minister.

### Insights, Lessons, and Implications

After a long and protracted process, a significant milestone has been reached with the signature of the accord and the creation of NORYDA. But, by no means, is this the end of the journey. There is no end to this journey. One can only talk about opening a new chapter. The peace process leading to the accord has given the protagonists hope that what they thought was impossible in terms of positive relationships with their adversaries is indeed possible. It has given them a taste of what that new relationship could look like and to expose them to a methodology that could generate mutually satisfying results if they worked on their differences in a certain way. Once they caught that glimpse, even if they have setbacks in their relationships, and there will definitely be setbacks, the expectation is that the protagonists themselves will build on these new insights and conduct their future interrelationships in a different way. However, as we know from interpersonal relationships, nurturing these new insights once the major obstacles and hostilities are removed is very hard work. Social attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors acquired over generations do not change overnight.

They require constant work, vigilance, and support. Once the major hostilities are removed, inertia begins to set in. After the flurry of activities leading to the peace accord, the sacrifices people make in terms of time, resources, donor interest, and support tend to subside. There is therefore a great concern about how to keep the commitment going. Given that NORYDA would have less attention and support from the facilitators and the NGO consortium, how much commitment and sacrifice will it continue to manifest? What is the best way to support and encourage over the long term such social change processes as the Kumasi Accord was able to usher in? How do societies internalize new values and attitudes and begin to live them? These are still unanswered questions that the peace process in Northern Ghana has to wrestle with.

Notwithstanding, these questions, what are some of the insights that can be drawn from the Ghana experience?

### Methodology of Reconciliation in Large-Scale Social Conflicts

The first lesson that comes out of the Northern Ghana case is methodology for working on reconciliation in large-scale social conflicts. Reconciliation is difficult enough in interpersonal conflict situations where there is more experience and precedence in terms of approaches and models. The problems multiply exponentially when working on reconciliation in large-scale conflicts where there are very few guides. This case illustrates a methodology that might be helpful in such cases. It demonstrates how it might be possible to start with a manageable number of actors and issues and then gradually expand outward to reach the whole community in order to address the multiplicity of issues in the conflict in a multidimensional and holistic manner. It provides some pointers on how to guide people through deep analysis of the problems underlying their common predicament and search for mutually satisfactory solutions in a spirit of self-criticism and mutual acceptance of responsibility. It gives some indications on how to facilitate a peace process which is owned by the community rather than by just the leaders and elites, as is usually the case in most peacemaking processes.

### Protracted Civil Wars and the Grassroots Approach

An interesting feature of the Northern Ghana peace process is that it was a bottom-up approach. This type of approach could have the potential of mitigating the havoc many protracted civil wars cause in Africa and a number of other places. Many of these wars, which presumably begin with claims for liberation, autonomy, freedom, or unity of one people or another, seem to have lost their original purpose and taken on a life of their own. Although it is mostly ordinary people who are paying for these wars with displacement or even their lives, the very people in whose name these wars are being waged do not seem to be able to influence the duration of these conflicts, the manner in which they are fought, or the sacrifice the conflicts entail. The driving force behind the

perpetuation of these wars seems to be the political ambition or economic gain of the leaders rather than popular commitment or support. Unfortunately, the culture of fear inculcated by the leaders in the population in the name of "security," "unity," "effective mobilization against the enemy," and so on, makes it difficult for the civilian population to challenge the wishes of the top leaders or to voice their preference for peaceful resolution. The Northern Ghana peacebuilding process suggests that one way of dealing with these kinds of conflicts might be to work at grassroots empowerment. By creating a forum for the grassroots where they are able to understand the conflicts, visualize alternatives, and articulate preferences, leadership can begin to emerge from below, which can influence top leaders' views and behavior. An active civil society begins to take shape that restrains the official leadership's commitment to perpetuating the conflict.

In Northern Ghana many top-level leaders were skeptical and even resistant to the peacebuilding process, while the people at the grassroots level were generally supportive of it. Eventually, the momentum created at the grassroots level began to gather force, pressuring the leaders to follow suit. Even the intransigent leaders came around and joined the process when they observed the enthusiasm and desire of their followers for it. They began to take cues from the people they were claiming to lead. Of course, these processes would have to be handled carefully, especially at the beginning, so that they are not seen as threats and are squelched by the top leaders. In the Northern Ghana situation, the process began in a very low-key, nonthreatening manner. The context for starting the work was "rehabilitation" and "development," to which most of the leadership could not object. By the time the impact began to be felt by the more intransigent leadership, the followers were already persuaded that the process must continue. Moreover, even the more intransigent leaders began to realize that the process had space for them. They were made to feel that even their adversaries could give a hearing to their extremist views as long as they were willing to be engaged and continue the dialogue. What proved fascinating later on was the "conversion" of the top-level leaders and their public confession of their responsibility for the role they played in the war and the destruction inflicted on each other's peoples.

### **The Coordination Dilemma**

In many peacebuilding initiatives, especially those undertaken by NGOs, it is very difficult to get the breathing room needed to work systematically at a process over a long duration. As soon as the process begins to show signs of progress, it attracts a lot of competition from other peacebuilders, mediators, politicians, funders, and so on, each trying to influence it with an approach that may not be sympathetic with the one already under way. Alternatively, a parallel process might be started by other actors that begins to create confusion and at times even cynicism among the conflict parties and outside observers. There are many cases where signs of progress in the peacebuilding process

trigger government intervention, which then prematurely takes over the process and risks losing the original vision or having it become politicized to the detriment of the process. This lack of incremental progress where new steps do not build on old is a cause of major frustration among practitioners in the field. In Northern Ghana, we were lucky to have the space to work at the peace process fairly intensively over a two-year period with little disruption and with the benefit of building on the momentum gained from previous steps. Part of the reason for this might have been because we enjoyed the respect of the parties and our partners, both of whom trusted us to lead the process as we deemed appropriate. Second, there was clarity of vision, concepts, and approach that struck a chord among participants. The "Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm" monograph that was widely shared helped participants to know where the facilitators were coming from and where they were headed. Third, the conflict was not a subject of much international media attention; therefore, it did not attract the interest of many project-hungry conflict resolution outfits. Although some tried to come in and start parallel processes, there was not much funding for their initiatives, and they didn't last long. Even the government's PPNT unintentionally gave us space, but for different reasons. It did not think that something useful would come out of what we were doing and left us alone until it saw the accord. We benefited from that space. One way of dealing with this problem of "space" and unhealthy competition could be creating mechanisms for coordination where different actors could work together or at least in a complementary fashion. However, the kind of coordination that seems to work best in peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives is one that emerges organically out of a shared philosophy and methodology. Unfortunately, that does not come easily. When coordination is a result of a "marriage of convenience" or is overtly or covertly compelled by outsiders (like governments or donors), it becomes a difficult process, rife with conflict among the people expected to coordinate their efforts. It tends to take as much energy to manage the coordination (trying to make peace among peacemakers) as to do the work for which the collaboration is needed. It is a major challenge to encourage coordination that emerges organically.

### **Relationship between Justice and Reconciliation**

In most deep-rooted social conflicts, issues of perceived or real injustice are invoked by one party against the other, if not reciprocally against each other. The approach to reconciliation used in Northern Ghana saw justice and reconciliation as inextricably intertwined. Any reconciliation that disregards issues of injustice underlying the conflict is not true reconciliation and will not be durable. It becomes appeasement by those who are benefiting from the injustice to calm down the "righteous indignation" of those who are suffering from the injustice. Reconciliation necessitates the transformation of unjust relationships to more just ones. That is why it is not easy. However, reconciliation and the pursuit of justice are not the same thing. Although justice

is a necessary condition for reconciliation, it is not a sufficient condition. The aim of justice is equity, to address perceived imbalances in the relationship and grant the aggrieved their due. However, even if people might have equitable relationships or their rights are respected, their relationship may still be adversarial; full of fear, suspicion, anger, and hostility. Reconciliation goes beyond equity and tries to transform these negative relationships into more trusting, positive, and cooperative relationships. There lies the painful dilemma of reconciliation work—how to work at justice while maintaining or building positive relationships, how to look at the past and correct grievances while creating an amicable and livable present and future for all the protagonists. Therefore, reconciliation calls for a different methodology for working at justice than the typical adversarial approach that ordinary judicial process implies.<sup>10</sup> In the Northern Ghana situation, the underlying cause of the conflict was the injustice perceived by the acephalous peoples regarding land ownership and inequitable social status at the hands of the chiefly peoples. On the other hand, the chiefly peoples thought it was unjust for the acephalous peoples to claim land ownership when it had been the chiefly peoples' generosity that allowed them to settle on the land in the first place, and since their right to use the land has been guaranteed. The aim of the reconciliation exercise was to come up with creative frameworks where justice is done to the claims of the parties against each other while at the same time enhancing harmonious coexistence between them. Some of the outcomes of the Kumasi Accord were able to meet these two objectives. For example, among the Dagomba on one hand and the Konkomba and Basare on the other, the Dagombas conceded to create paramount chiefs for the latter two groups and to recognize their right to own land through these chiefs. Such recognition of land ownership also enhanced the political and economic status of the Konkombas and Basares. Lest the Dagombas who conceded to this right feel threatened by the creation of autonomous paramount chieftaincies in their region, the Konkombas and Basares created a commonwealth by being part of the Dagomba Traditional Council, which is the traditional administrative organ for the region. This reaffirmed the traditional linkages that existed between the three groups and encouraged them to work together for the welfare of the region, which will benefit all three. What was particularly interesting about the Kumasi processes was how the issues of injustice were presented in such a manner that even those who were accused of being unjust publicly admitted it and took an active role in addressing it.

### **Reconciliation as Mediation between Tradition and Modernity**

One interesting facet of the Northern Ghana experience was the significant role traditional institutions played in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process. Compared to many African societies, the traditional systems of social organization in Ghana are still intact and powerful. The institutions of chiefs and elders are still rich in culture, and they command great authority and influence in their communities. They were not only useful entry points for the

peacebuilding and reconciliation process but also were critical in sustaining and reinforcing whatever peace resulted from the processes. We, as facilitators faced the dilemma of how to work with and through these institutions that appeared to have many autocratic features, which stratify people as rulers and subjects on undemocratic principles. In the last three decades of political and economic modernization processes in Africa, the prevailing view had been to present these traditional institutions as having nothing to offer and to reject them wholesale as backward and undemocratic. At first, we were similarly tempted to bypass these structures in this peacebuilding process, on the assumption that working with them was somehow accepting and reinforcing these negative characteristics. However, one of the lessons that has emerged from the failure of many modernization and development efforts of the recent past in Africa has been that ignoring or dismantling these traditional institutions has had serious detrimental consequences. Grafted systems from other cultures imposed on African realities have not only failed to take root and produce durable and positive impact, but have brought about alienation and confusion. We also realized that as peacebuilders and change agents in our own right, our strategy should be to identify the positive dimensions of these traditional institutions and strengthen them while mitigating some of their arbitrary, undemocratic, and unjust characteristics rather than undermine or bypass them entirely. In effect, then, in addition to mediating between adversaries, the peacebuilding processes in Northern Ghana became a mediating ground between modernity and tradition. The aim became how to reinforce positive traditional values of belongingness, meaning, stability, and cohesion by slowly infusing them with modern values of citizenship, participation, and equity. Some of the statements made by the chiefs during the Kumasi processes were illustrative of the kind of change that was beginning to take place. "As a chief, what I experienced in Kumasi will help me administer with justice all the ethnic groups I rule." "As a chief I have to meet my subjects on my return and brief them all on what have I experienced here, and teach them that there is need for reconciliation and peace in order to enhance development. . . . I shall organize the youth and educate them against misinformation, tribalism, and injustice." One celebrated chief suggested, "Let us get women to take part since women can talk to us to understand peace better." It was felt that as long as "justice," "participation," and "respect for people's rights" become major guiding principles, there would be major benefits in working within and strengthening the traditional institutions. Under these circumstances, something genuinely indigenous could develop that could continue to provide meaning and significance to the people but at the same time respond to their evolving needs. This approach has important implications for the development of African governance systems where the great preoccupation of the past decade had been the imposition of multiparty political institutions and processes with the total disregard for indigenous institutions that might be useful. In many instances, the new institutions have not produced the expected result but have also generated their own confusion and conflicts. There seems to be a need to build upon mechanisms that have been tested by time and to reform

them with the desired values rather than destroy them with the hope that the new ones will work. The experience of how this was done in the peacebuilding process in Northern Ghana might be instructional in this regard.

### Role of Religion in the Reconciliation Process

The conflict in Northern Ghana had a religious dimension. The two major protagonists were divided along religious lines. Although most of them shared various forms of African traditional religions, most of the chiefly groups such as the Dagomba, Gonja, and Nanumba are Muslims, while the acephalous groups are predominantly Christian, at least on the leadership level. Although the conflict was not about religion per se (where one side is trying to convert or impose its religious value on the other), religious differences served to reinforce the existing divisions between the groups. Both groups had fears about the expansion of the other religion, and some more fundamentalist preachers had sparked Muslim-Christian riots in the region. The methodology for the reconciliation process in Northern Ghana, which was inspired by the "Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm" philosophy, had a spiritual dimension. One of the strategies used in the process was to help the participants walk through various steps in the reconciliation process, such as honest self-examination, acknowledgment of responsibility, public admission, seeking apology, providing restitution, and so on. Both religions had well-adapted concepts and frameworks to do this. The concepts of confession, repentance, seeking forgiveness, mercy, and atonement are recognized in both religions. Also, both faiths acknowledge that people have accountability for their behavior to an entity greater than themselves, and that even if they managed to deceive each other, there was an all-knowing and all-perceiving being who challenges them to be honest. The reconciliation process fostered those common beliefs and helped generate an environment for very sincere self-examination and self-criticism. Both Christian and Muslim participants were able to go beyond their religious identities and meet at a spiritual meeting point where they could look critically at their behavior with, as the participants put it, "God as a witness." Exploring the religious and spiritual dimension allowed the process to move beyond the competitive and legalistic discussion and get to the bottom of problems. However, it is important to distinguish between religion and spirituality. Religion has been used as an instrument of division, and if the focus is on religion itself, it might be difficult to bring together adversaries who do not share the same faith. But focus on spirituality can enable people to transcend their differences in dogma or rituals and focus on the essence of all religions. If the process manages to get the parties to that point, there is a powerful meeting place there, which can unleash tremendous possibilities for honesty and reconciliation. Although this author was raised a Christian and practices that faith, in one of these workshops a Muslim Sheik commented to me: "You may not know it, but you are deeply Muslim." That was an indication that we were drinking from the same spiritual fountain, although we came at it from different

religious entry points. That was the spirit of Kumasi. In a way, the Kumasi process was challenging people not only to come to resolve the specific problems of the conflict in Northern Ghana, but to also reflect on themselves and become better Christians, Muslims, or even human beings since the self-reflection, honesty, humility, and understanding of others are also signs of mature human relationships and healthy societies.

### Notes

1. The peacebuilding process that this case describes took place between November 1994 and December 1996. I would like to thank Isaac Osei of Action Aid, Chris Bonuedie from World Vision, Jack Bochwe from Assemblies of God, Jessewuni Issahaku from BADECC, and Ben Pugansoa from Oxfam, who were not only great partners and team members on the ground, but also whose tireless follow-up and sense of humor made the process bearable and rewarding. Thanks also to George Wachira and Florence Mpaye, who gave a backing from the Nairobi office to the work that Emmanuel Bombande and I were doing in the field. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ineke Van Winden of the Dutch Interchurch Aid, who provided encouragement for the initiative and was instrumental in providing financial backing for the work, as well as to my wife, Gretchen Van Evera, for her patient and helpful support during the peacebuilding work and for her editorial assistance.

2. Ada van der Linde and Rachel Naylor, *The Peace Process in Northern Ghana*, an unpublished report, p. 46. The authors report that the figures come from a National Mobilization Program developed in May 1994 to deal with the aftermath of the conflict.

3. Linde and Naylor, p. 47.

4. Linde and Naylor, p. 47.

5. However, this is slowly changing. In some areas which are densely populated by Konkombas, the paramount chiefs of the chiefly groups have appointed lower level Konkomba chiefs who pledge allegiance to them.

6. The members of the consortium were Action Aid, Action on Disability and Development, Amaschina, Assemblies of God, BADECC, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Secretariat, Council of Churches, Gupgatemale, Lifeline Denmark, Pernoridas, Oxfam, Red Cross, TIDA, and World Vision.

7. Youth associations have very strong influence in their respective ethnic communities, especially on issues of the conflict. They were responsible for mobilizing people and resources for the war effort. Although called *youth associations*, most of the leaders are in their forties and fifties.

8. Due to shortage of space, the details of what transpired in the processes of Kumasi III up to Kumasi IV have been drastically summarized. More detailed discussion is provided in a publication by the author, called *Process of Expanding and Deepening Engagement: Methodology of Reconciliation Work in Large-Scale Social Conflicts* (forthcoming).

9. "There are more arms around in markets and they were being actively sold in Tamale, Accra, and other markets. The presence of arms seems to have been a cause or at least a heavily provocative factor in the conflict and in the spread of violence." A quote from an interview in van der Linde and Naylor, *The Peace Process in Northern Ghana*, p. 44.
10. See Hizkias Assefa, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," in *People Building Peace* (Utrecht, Netherlands: European Center for Conflict Prevention, 1999).