International Journal of Development and Sustainability
ISSN: 2186-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds
Volume 14 Number 12 (2025): Pages 1070-1086
https://doi.org/10.63212/IJDS25041301

Structure and succession in the traditional political system of the Gonja in Ghana

Tanko Daniel Dawda *, Joseph Kwabena Manboah-Rockson, Robert Adjuik Yakubu

S.D. Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies, Wa, Ghana

Abstract

This work is a contribution to the general discourse on traditional authority systems in Ghana. The study was carried out using interviews and focus group discussions relying on purposive and snowball sampling techniques to contact 55 respondents. The study revealed that traditional political authority in Gonja revolves around the institution of chieftaincy and involves both male and female chiefs organised along six main divisions. The structure of authority is a promotional hierarchical system on the male line and by appointment on the female line. This structure assumes the form of a pyramid with the Yagbunwura at the top and it broadens at the base through the paramount chiefs and divisional chiefs down to the sub-chiefs and gate leaders at the community level. In conclusion, the authority system of the Gonja political system is organised along female and male lines from the village through sub-divisions and divisions to the paramountcy. However, there are marked differences in the system of succession between the female and male chiefs. Whereas, the system of succession on the male line is on a promotional circulatory basis, the system of succession on the line of the Wuriche (female chief) is not necessarily, and usually not promotional or circulatory.

Keywords: Gonja, Wuriche; Wura, Authority; Succession; Conquest; Organisation; Structure

Published by ISDS LLC, Japan | Copyright © 2025 by the Author(s) | This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Cite this article as: Dawda, T.D., Manboah-Rockson, J.K. and Yakubu, R.A. (2025), "Structure and succession in the traditional political system of the Gonja in Ghana", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 12, pp. 1070-1086.

* Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* tdawda@ubids.edu.gh

1. Introduction

Political authority in African society revolves around the traditional political system. Generalisations about the traditional political systems in Africa are, however, difficult to make because the continent is not one homogenous cultural entity. The traditional political systems in Africa as well as the cultures that underpin their existence are rooted in diverse contexts which form the basis for which descriptions or classifications can be made (Sesay, 2014). In their study of African political systems, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), sought to classify African traditional political systems into two broad categories. One group, they suggest consists of societies which have tendencies towards centralised authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions and in short, a government and they refer to them as centralised states. The other group comprises societies which have very limited degree of centralised authority, administrative machinery and institutionalised judiciary, which.

In the categorisation of African traditional societies, what is clear is that, there is some form of sovereign authority in some political systems while in some there is no sovereign authority. The divergence between the two systems can be seen on the point that one has been able to develop a hierarchical state structure beyond the confines of the village or even the ethnic group while the other clings on to clannish political order with territorial coverage conterminous to the confines of the village. The means of social control in both systems revolve around what Lentz (2006) refers to as 'dynamics of clanship'. Their norms and values consist of well and long-established rules of conduct usually enforced by heads of various segments of the society.

These classifications are helpful in providing understanding about the fact that there are different political formations in Africa. In that regard, the various perspectives on the types of political systems in Africa, therefore, provide significant insight for our understanding of the nature and organisation of most African traditional political systems.

Irrespective of the type of political system, leadership in most traditional African societies is characterised by a lack of what Okonjo refers to as 'gender parallelism' due to the patriarchal nature of societies (Sudarkasa, 1987; Okonjo, 1976). This is when both men and women in the society have separate activities; each having specific but different roles that complement each other. The concentration of functions has more often than not been directed towards the authority and role of males. In patriarchal societies where males are considered superior to females, political authority is also wielded by the male segment of the society with little or no room for female involvement. The patriarchal order defines the normative order in the society as well. This permeates the social and cultural system to the extent that females without question define their roles and positions according to the dictates of patriarchal values.

In Ghana, the Gonja ethnic group has a state structure with social and governance arrangements that are hierarchical. According to Goody and Goody (1967), the Gonja are originally Mandingo or Mandinka from Mande country in the Mali Empire, who migrated and moved southwards to cross the Black Volta into their present settlement in Northern Ghana. According to Braimah, Tomlinson, & Amankwatia, (1997), with their leader Naba'a who reigned from 1552 to about 1582, they engaged in wars of conquest with the people they came into contact with in the area above the middle belt and across the south of the northern part of present-day Ghana. By 1675, their leader Sumaila Ndewura Jakpa founded the Ngbanya kingdom of the Gonja and the capital was established in Yagbun (Ratray, 1932). The Gonja then established a paramount ruler, called the

Yagbunwura who administered the kingdom. Every Prince of the Ndewura Jakpa's line may aspire to the Paramount chiefship of Yagbun, but he must have occupied a junior skin in his division.

There are five divisions of Ndewura Jakpa and his sons' lineage from which eligible chiefs can ascend to the throne of Yagbunwura. These are Wasipe, Kpembe, Bole, Tuluwe and Kusawgu divisions. Sub-divisions also qualify to occupy vacant skins of the various divisions. The Gonja society is organised along patriarchal lines where males are considered as natural leaders and women are to subordinate to them. However, space is created for females to also become chiefs to occupy various skins in the kingdom.

About almost a century, the Gonja state has been one of the few societies in Ghana among the near-centralised states that had not experienced serious dispute or conflict with regards to the occupancy of the highest skin of authority (Yagbun). There must be something peculiar about this system in terms of its structure and organisation which will be worth investigating as a way of contributing to the general literature on African traditional political systems. To consider this, benefit will be derived from the discourse developed by Africanist anthropologists and researchers, a perspective that considers both the present and the past in understanding current social institutions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Power, authority and legitimacy

The most traditional view of power is that it is a form of control over a person and a way of forcing one person to obey another. This could otherwise be termed domination (Barnard, 1938). Fayorsey (2006), argues that in a state of nature we would all have power over each other, meaning the most violent would win, in order to escape from this brutality, we would have to accept and submit to a monarch. The King would have power over people, would dominate and can force his will upon them and get them to do things they would not otherwise, but this is the price of order. However, this view of power as domination is very narrow, and runs into the problem that in our daily lives power is very commonly exercised through the acceptance and willing obedience of the public. This is because those in power are also in authority.

According to Weber (1958), authority refers to the willing and unconditional compliance of people, resting upon their belief that it is legitimate for the superior to impose his or her will on them and illegitimate for them to refuse to obey. Drawing from Weber's definition, authority for the purposes of this study is used to refer to the ability and the right of an individual or group to rule over a group of people by conducting their affairs according to laid down procedure established by the group. The focus is on the right and ability of traditional leaders/chiefs (the Ewura) to conduct affairs within the Gonja political system in respect of the laid down procedure which claims obedience from the Gonja society.

Those in power do not merely possess the ability to make us comply but are also thought to have the right to do so. This is an important distinction and is the difference between power and authority. Power is the ability to make us do something while authority is the right to make us do something (Brydon, 1996).

Legitimacy is the perception that power is exercised in a rightful, justified and acceptable manner. Although a person may have authority a whole system of government would be regarded as legitimate. Legitimacy is the

basis of stable political systems and all political systems seek legitimacy –how they achieve it and keep it is essential to their existence.

Power is thus considered as something which may be delegated or distributed almost invariably from a centralised point to various authoritative locations across any given territory. Lentz (2003), has described this type of imagery as a 'centred' conception of power, where a central source is responsible for the diffusion of power within and across society. At its simplest, Bruno argues, power is delegated or distributed in a relatively straightforward manner down through an organisational hierarchy under clear lines of authority, and there may be one of two outcomes. Either the rules, regulations and constraints imposed by the centre are successful in meeting its goals or their organisational impact is minimised or deflected by the degree of resistance met.

In making a case for the structural nature of power over others, Jonah (2003) locates the asymmetry in the unequal distribution of power in society. As he puts it relations of domination and subordination comprise a subset of power relations, where the capacities to act are not distributed symmetrically to all parties to the relationship. Some people and some groups have more power than others, not by accident or by a series of fortunate events, but by virtue of the structure of relations of which they are a part. The capacity to secure advantage thus stands in relation to the potential loss realised by others, who in one way or another, are enmeshed in the same web of asymmetrical relationships.

To summarise, power, authority and legitimacy are components that every political system seeks. Power can be exerted by anyone, but unless that person is perceived as being in authority then they will face disobedience. Legitimacy can be seen as the way that a system of power can achieve authority by being seen as rightful.

2.2. Traditional political system

The term 'traditional' is used to denote the conventional, customary and long-established ways of behaviour and living which have been held unto by a group of people or society for a long time without change or with minimal change over time (Ranger, 1984). This study focuses on the long-established customs and conventions which determine the way of behaviour and living of the Gonja with specific reference to their political and social arrangement. In short, the indigenous and native ways of behaviour before the coming into contact with the Europeans which have been maintained and practiced till date with little or no change.

The concept of 'political system' is used taking into consideration the meanings of the two words, 'political' and 'system'. Political is used here to refer to the exercising of power and authority and the organizing of a group of people or society into a form of government. The system is used to refer to a set of interconnected parts that functions as a single unit to achieve a particular goal (Easton, 1953). The political system according to Heywood (2000), refers to any organised social organisation in which authority system exists in determining the basic functions of political interaction which Lasswell (1936) attributes to 'who gets what, when and how'. According to Easton (1953), the political system is that system of interaction in any society through which binding and authoritative allocation of values are made and implemented. It is that part of social organization within which people make inputs which generate outcomes in the form of outputs to fulfill societal goals. To Easton, changes in the political system produce "demands" and "supports" for action or the status quo directed as "inputs" towards the society, through political behaviour.

The study relies on these perspectives of the political system as espoused by Lasswell (1936), Heywood (2000) and Easton (1953) to look at that aspect of Gonja society which is concerned with the control, regulation and the total organization of the people with the use of rules and some physical force. This involves the network of individuals, groups and organisations in Gonja whose relationships help to determine, enforce and interpret the rules of behaviour of the Gonja society. The thrust here, therefore, is to look at the Gonja society in its different parts of organization, that is, the office of the Wuriche, the office of the male chief, and the divisions and sub-divisions of Gonja which all function together as a single unit for the political administration of the Gonja kingdom.

2.3. Theoretical framework

The study relied on theories related to state formation and authority. In particular, the Max Werber's theory of authority (the classical theory of authority and the acceptance theory of authority) are examined. The section provides a theoretical framework and basis upon which the Gonja political system and the authority of traditional leaders can be examined.

2.3.1. The theory of authority (Weber, 1958)

Max Weber in his "The three types of legitimate rule" espouses a theory of authority that outlines three forms of authority; traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority. Weber suggests that traditional authority is that type of authority that is legitimated by the sanction of tradition. The ability and right of the leader to occupy a position and rule in the capacity of the office is based on inheritance and is passed on from one individual to the other often through heredity. This type of authority he argues does not change overtime and tends to be 'irrational and inconsistent' and perpetuates the status quo. Traditional authority in most African traditional societies, used to be embedded in patrimonialism and in purely patriarchal structure where the servants were completely and personally dependent upon the ruler or the servants may not be personal servants of the ruler but independent men. In both cases however, the system of authority does not change or evolve.

Charismatic authority he argues is exercised by an individual whose personal attributes, mission and vision inspires others. This form of authority is therefore, based on the perceived extraordinary characteristics of the individual leader. Weber suggests that the charismatic leader is the head of a new social movement, and one instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet. Weber proposes that legal-rational authority is empowered by a formalistic belief in the content of the law (legal) or natural law (rationality). Here, obedience is not given to a specific individual leader but a set of uniform principles. Weber argues that the best form of legal-rational authority is political bureaucracy. This form of authority is frequently found in the modern democratic states, and city governments.

However, in considering authority, no authority structure could actually be exclusively traditional, charismatic or legal-rational as observed by Weber himself. According to Coser, Weber's forms of authority are based on "pure" types of authority and that "he was aware that in reality, mixtures will be found in the legitimation of authority" (Coser 1971, 227). Spencer (1970), suggests that legitimate order and authority stems from different aspects of a single phenomenon that underlie all instances of ordered interaction. He

explains that "authority and norms represent polar principles of social organization: In the one case, organization rests upon orientation to a rule or a principle; in the other instance it is based upon compliance and commands" (Spencer 1970, 124). As such many examples of the authority types postulated by Weber may overlap. For example, as argued by Riesebrodt (1999), charisma plays a strong, if not integral, role in traditional authority systems. Weber himself suggests that Charismatic authority is routinized in a number of ways: orders are traditionalized, the staff or followers change into legal-rational or estate-like (traditional) staff, or the meaning of charisma itself may undergo change with the death or decline of a charismatic leader.

Therefore, one form of these authority types will dominate the exercise of the right and ability to rule in most political systems. For instance, modern democratic systems with their bureaucratic arrangements may exhibit some features of charismatic authority, but their authority structures are underlined by the principles of rational-legal authority.

2.3.2. Formal or classical theory of authority

This theory is underpinned by the principle of scalar chain or organizational theory of society. Authority in the realms of classical theory is considered to flow from top to bottom through various levels of hierarchy. It flows from the leader through subordinates to the general societal level. Every subordinate accepts without question the authority of the leader and obeys instructions issued by the superiors. Coercive measures are used to demand obedience to prevent or punish disobedience. When the person leaves the organization or system, he or she also loses the authority to issue instructions (Spencer, 1970). The flow of authority is governed by the process of delegation. Each leader within the system can only exercise that much authority that is invested in him or her or is delegated through superiors.

The authority clearly defines the job of the position, that is, the task the position holder must achieve through orders to be given to the subordinates. Weber, a principal proponent of classical theory of authority states that "authority is the willing and unconditional compliance of people, resting upon their belief that it is legitimate for superior to impose his will on them and illegitimate for them to refuse to obey" (Weber 1958, 16). This theory of authority sees authority on a top-down process where leaders command their follows to do what they want and expect them to do and the followers by virtue of belonging to that society are obliged to obey the orders of their leaders.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design

This study adopted a descriptive ethnographic design. A descriptive design offers descriptive reports of individuals', views and attitudes to events and issues on female chieftaincy in Gonja. This design is relied upon as it offers a more useful approach to which the Gonja political system can be examined as an institution. It offers a framework within which the structure and organisation of the political system can be described and interpreted from the meanings and understanding of the data collected.

3.2. Sampling and sample size

and snowball sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the conduct of the study. In using these techniques, the Gonja Traditional area was purposively zoned under seven main divisions. These divisions comprised Bole, Tulewe, Kusawgu, Kpembi, Wasipe, Buipe and Yagbon skins. The reason for this zoning method is that, every chief in Gonja falls under one of these main divisions which are clearly demarcated and form the main administrative divisions of the Gonja traditional political system. From these divisions, samples were drawn using the purposive and snowball sampling to select chiefs and key informants for purposes of data collection respectively. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the chiefs for interviewing. The snowball technique was used to identify and interview key informants where the researcher was led to individuals with knowledge of the issues under investigation.

In all, the respondents comprised seven chiefs, 17 key informants and seven members of the council of elders at the Yagbunwura's palace. The total number comprised of 31 people with 22 males and 9 females across the seven main traditional divisions whose responses constituted the report of the study.

3.3. Data collection and analysis methods

In-depth interviews were conducted on the chiefs to gather information on the general structure and organisation of the Gonja. Two focus group discussions were conducted. One was conducted at the Yagbunwura's palace and the other at the Mankumawuriche's palace. The members of the Council of elders at the Yagbunwura's Palace and the elders at the Mankumawuriche's palace were put into two separate groups and used to hold focus group discussions for purposes of collecting information from them. Finally, as a method of gathering data, archival search was conducted to review the content of archival materials from the Tamale archives. This involved review of archival materials from files on the Gonja traditional affairs which contained documentations on matters including modes of succession, installation of chiefs, and the constitution of the Gonja state as well as correspondence on traditional political matters. Data collected from the interviews was and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

4. Analysis and presentation

4.1. Structure and organisation of the Gonja state

For our understanding of the authority of the wuriche, it is important to examine the structure and organisation of the political system within which she operates. The organisation of the indigenous political arrangements of the Gonja revolves around the institution of chieftaincy. The chieftaincy institution among the Gonja people is one of the most resilient traditional political systems in Northern Ghana. The Gonja are among a few of the societies in Northern Ghana who are centrally organised in terms of traditional governance. By far, it is one of the most stable in Northern Ghana because they have not experienced serious conflicts with regard to succession to the central seat. Among the Gonja people, Chieftaincy plays a key role in the governance of their society.

All the rulers of Gonja including the male chiefs and female chiefs are of the royal line of their founder Sumaila Ndewura Jakpa and his sons. At the head of the Gonja state is the Yagbunwura. Every Prince (Ewuribi)

of the Ndewura Jakpa's line may aspire to the Paramount chiefship of Yagbun, but he must first be content with a junior skin in his division. Yagbunwura Tuntunba Boresa I, states that such a position may be a title without a village, or a village the candidate/prince and his family may be the only Gonjas among the more numerous commoners (Nyamase) in a given area. This situation arises because the Gonja often rule over other ethnic groups who are settled within the conquered territory of Ndewura Jakpa.

On the female line, the Mankumawuriche is the highest authority. She is appointed by the Yagbunwura and she is usually a sister or daughter to the Yagbunwura who appoints her. Like the Yagbunwura, the Mankumawuriche occupies her seat till her death. This gives her the power and legitimacy to carry out her functions as a traditional leader without fear or threats of her removal from office. This provides representation to women at the top hierarchy of the organisation of the Gonja political system.

According to Bolewura, Awuladese Pontonpron II, (Chief of Bole), the Gonja state is organised along five main levels of hierarchy. At every level of the hierarchy, there are the male chiefs and the female chiefs who are expected to play complementary roles in the society. The Yagbun is the head skin of the Gonja state and it is followed by the Buipe Skin. There are also the five divisions who ascend the throne of the Yagbun; Wasipe, Kpembe, Bole, Tuluwe and Kusawgu. These divisions provide the seats for the authority of the wuriche in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

These five divisions which used to be seven (including Kung and Kadia which have been removed from this bracket) are believed to be the line of Ndewura Jakpa and his sons' lineage from which eligible chiefs can ascend to the skin of Yagbun (the Paramount Skin of Gonja State). The skin is used in northern Ghana for occupancy of chiefly positions as a symbol of authority which signifies the availability of livestock and wildlife in the region.

The next line is the nine divisional chiefs who are the Sonyowura, Damongowura, Debrewura, Choriwura, Mankpanwura, Kulaw-wura, Kpansawguwura, Nsuawura and Busunuwura. The chiefs of these divisions act as council of elders and kingmakers to the Yagbonwura and therefore do not inherit the Yagbun throne because the Yagbun skin is regarded as the skin for their sons. Various sub-divisions also qualify to occupy vacant skins of the various divisions. For example, according to the Kpemewura, the Kpembe skin can only be occupied by the chieftains of Kanyase, Singbing and Lepo. There are various families that are also eligible to occupy vacant skins of the sub-divisional chieftains. For instance, the Denkeripebi and the Labopebi families are the only eligible royals to occupy the vacant skin of Buipe.

While the Yagbunwura is in charge of the general organisation and the day to day administration of the entire Gonja state the divisional chiefs (male and female) handle matters which come directly under their specific jurisdictions. The divisional chiefs are thus, responsible for the administration of matters of the communities which fall under their sovereignty. Then the sub-divisional chiefs who are chiefs of various villages are in turn responsible for administering the day to day concerns of the people of their respective communities of which they are chiefs over.

It was observed that, during council meetings at the Yagbun palace and the divisional palaces, the seating arrangement is according to this organisation. At the Yagbun palace, divisional chiefs sit to the right of the Yagbunwura with the division next to succeed seated next to the Yagbunwura and the kingmakers sit to the left of the Yagbunwura. When the Mankumahwuriche is present, she sits next the Yagbunwura to his right. Issues are also discussed along those lines where the divisional chiefs speak before the kingmakers (elders)

and then the Mankumawuriche and the Yagbunwura speaks last. This arrangement is replicated in a similar manner at the divisional palace where the divisional chief is the head authority. What must be noted is that, the position of the female chief is exhibited throughout the organisation.

The fifth and final category consists of female chiefs who have the Mankumawuriche as their senior-most in terms of authority and influence. According to Yagbunwura Tuntumba Sulemani Boresa II (the paramount chief of Gonjaland), the precondition for the occupancy of any vacant skin in Gonjaland is for the person (male or female) to hail from the lineage of Ndewura Jakpa and his sons. The position of the female chief is created throughout the divisions down to the village level. This arrangement creates space for the representation of women at all levels of the organisation. He states that;

> *There are a number of Buwuriche (female Chiefs) across the various divisions of Gonja. The Buwuriche are appointed by the Yagbunwura, the divisional chiefs and elders or sub-chiefs depending on the area of jurisdiction for which the vacancy for the position of the Wuriche (Female chief) occurs. The Yagbunwura, for example appoints the Mankumawuriche in case of an existing vacancy and the Buruwuriche in the Wasipe division is appointed by the Wasipewura.* Interview with Yagbunwura Tuntumba Boresa II (14th March, 2024).

The Wuriche is usually the sister or daughter of the appointing chief. Sometimes however, she needs not be related to the chief. But she must be a member of the royal family and her father need not hold, nor have held the office of a chief. The female chiefs therefore, may or may not be directly related to the appointing chief. The sons of Buwuriche are also qualified to occupy some skins in their respective lineage. In the Bole division for example, Bolewura Awuladese Pontonpron II states that, the sons of Buwuriche are entitled to the Serikpe, Kulmasa, Maluwe and Kpankpansiri chiefships.

Mr. Kachitowura Sibu (former secretary to the Gonja Traditional Council) suggests that in Gonja the principle of structural organisation is a patriarchal principle of authority where men are generally seen to be heads of families. The Gonja society is not only patriarchal but also patrilineal and as a general principle, the society is characterised by ingrained male chauvinism where it is the man who is expected to provide for the woman and the man must be recognised as the head of the family. Mr. Sibu argues that, despite the patrilineal and patriarchal arrangement of the Gonja society, space is provided for some women to be chiefs within the structure and organisation of the Gonja traditional political system. He states that;

> *The status of the Wuriche in Gonjaland like that of the male chief has its historical antecedents and can be traced back as far as the 16th Century when the Gonja Kingdom was founded by Ndewura Jakpa. Ndewura Jakpa appointed his sister to the skin of Mankuma to take charge of the Mankuma community after he had conquered that community and brought it under Gonja authority. From then, more women were appointed to occupy skins of communities but majority were believed to be close family relatives of Ndewura Jakpa. These Buwuriche held and administered their respective communities on behalf of the founder of the kingdom, Ndewura Jakpa.* Interview with Kachitowura (20th February, 2024).

It is believed that these female chiefs exercised legislative, executive and judicial powers in their communities and reported to their divisional heads who were male chiefs or the Yagbunwura in the case of the

Mankumawuriche. The position of the wuriche is therefore an ascribed one by criteria based on which she derives authority. It is the process of her appointment through ascription that legitimises her power as a traditional authority.

The central seat of government was at Nyanga, which was later moved to Damongo in 1944. The Buipewura, in an interview suggests that the movement of the capital was as a result of the need to find a central location which was more accessible to all the divisions that ascend to the Yagbun skin. In the search, Damongo was identified as a more suitable place by all the divisions to host the central authority. However, the council of elders at the Yagbunwura's palace disputed the claims of the Buipewura. They suggested that so many Yagbunwuras died at Nyanga (between 1907 and 1942) shortly after they were installed. So, it came to a point that the divisional chiefs were not willing to ascend to the Yagbun skin again and that left it vacant for the period because no chief wanted to die shortly after installation. In 1942, Singbing Lannyo from Kusawgu ascended to the Yagbun skin and died after nine months. Following this, his successor, Ewur Bunyangso (who became Yagbunwura Ewisi upon succeeding to the Yagbun skin) from Wasipe on his installation moved to Damongo and lived for 32 years. All successors after Yagbunwura Ewisi subsequently chose to live in Damongo and established Damongo as the new capital.

From the palace of the Yagbunwura, and those of his divisional chiefs, the chiefs rule their subjects through the issuance of directives and sanctions for violations of such directives usually based on recommendations from the deliberations of the council of elders. The chiefs used to have a standing army which was used to protect the territory and its people, but this has since given way following the advent of modern state formation by the British through colonialism and post-colonial modern forms of government. Chiefs still keep horses at their palaces to symbolize the warring calvary function of the past. Following that, the Mankumawuriche also relocated from Mankuma which was closer to Nyanga and settled in Damongo where her brother lived.

These traditional leaders also operated their court systems where they adjudicated upon cases that were brought before them. They also instituted their own laws, rules and regulations that were used to govern the people. The authority of the wuriche depends on her ability to carry out these functions in her society. Though some levels of these functions are still being exercised by the chiefs presently, most of that responsibility has been whittled away by the formal state institutions. However, the Gonja people are still well organised under their traditional political system which gives space for female representation and participation. It is this arrangement that provides the power and authority which is expected to be exercised by the wuriche.

4.2. Authority structure and system of succession in Gonja

The structure of authority in Gonja is a promotional hierarchical system on the male line. Tolodompewura suggests that, in Gonja, the chiefship relations are structured in such a way that the divisional chiefs are in fact classificatory younger brothers and sisters of the paramount chiefs of the state. He further states that, the authority structure which is in the form of a pyramid has at the top of it the Yagbunwura.

The Yagbunwura is revered as the King and Overlord of the Gonja state. Tolodompewura indicates that the Yagbunwura is regarded as the symbol of unity and power of the Gonja people. The Tuluwewura during an interview also suggests that the Gonja political system is structured according to a clan system where various clans constituting the Gonja state occupy respective positions within the system. He identifies the ruling or royal clan (Ewurbi), the elders (Dogtes), the warrior clan (Mbongopu), and the Muslim clan (Sakpare Muslims).

The head of the royal clan is the Yagbunwura and the Mankumawuriche is on the female line. The senior elder (Dogte) is the Senyonwura and the Nsuawura heads the linguists. Among the Mbongopu (the warrior clan), the senior most is the Mbonwura who doubles as the Busunuwura (chief of Busunu) while the head of the Sakpare Muslims is the Liman at the Yagbunwura's palace. These offices are replicated in all the divisions through the sub-divisions and to the village level. The roles of each of these clans are clearly spelt out in such a manner that it is difficult for anyone to crisscross to perform functions that are not ascribed to him or her.

Directly below the Yagbunwura are two major skins; the Buipewura and the Mankumawuriche. The Buipewura is a unique position in the structure in that he is not the Yagbunwura and he does not also belong to any of the divisions. The Buipewura Jinapor contends that;

> *My position as a chief in Gonja is equal to, if not greater than that of the Yagbunwura because I enrobe the Yagbunwura and that explains why there is no need to leave the Buipe skin and ascend the Yagbun skin.* Interview with Buipewura Jinapor I (23rd November, 2024).

However, this position was disputed by the council of elders who agreed that the Buipewura plays a significant role when it comes to the installation of a new Yagbunwura but that does not put him in the same position with the Yagbunwura or higher. Also, the other five divisional chiefs of Kpembe, Wasipe, Bole, Tuluwe and Kusawgu agree that the position of the Buipewura is higher than their authority but definitely not up to the authority of the Yagbunwura. These accounts signify the important authority the Buipewura holds within the Gonja traditional structure.

The Mankumawuriche leads the female chieftaincy wing. She is not equal to the Yagbunwura in terms of authority but usually regarded to be ahead of the divisional chiefs and Kingmakers. She therefore, occupies a key position within the structure as far as traditional governance is concerned. She also has other chiefs at the sub-structures at the various divisions who are subordinates to her in terms of authority and influence.

If any political system is to be sustainable and stable, the system and mode of succession is crucial in maintaining and ensuring the continuous existence of the system. It determines how strong or weak the system can be under succession pressures. The mode of succession to high office from sub-divisional to divisional and finally to Yagbun is a rotational promotional ladder system of inheritance along male lines. Goody (1966), describes this system of succession as 'circulating succession'. The ultimate office of succession in the Gonja state is the Yagbun skin. However, this does not apply to some chiefs since their positions do not allow them to ascend to the Yagbun skin. The circulating system does not also apply to the female chiefs. The chiefs who do not qualify to ascend to the Yagbun skin include the divisional chiefs of Buipe and the nine divisional skins, who are kingmakers and councillors to the Yagbunwura.

The Buipewura by tradition installs the Yagbunwura and therefore, cannot abdicate his skin to assume the position of the Yagbunwura. The other divisional chiefs, who constitute the council of elders and kingmakers of the Yagbunwura, do not ascend to the seat of Yagbun because they are considered by tradition and custom to be the fathers of the Yagbun skin. It is considered not appropriate for a father to compete with his son over the occupancy of the same seat. The female chiefs as well cannot ascend to the skin of Yagbun for their equivalent of Yagbunwura is the Mankumawuriche. They nonetheless also have their processes of succession to reach their apex position. The system of succession involving female chiefs is thus different from what pertains in the male line.

On the male side, the structure is such that, five main divisional skins exist and succeed to the throne of the Yagbun skin in order of rotation. These divisions are: Wasipe, Bole, Kpembe, Tuluwe and Kusawgu. When it comes to the turn of the Wasipewura to ascend to the apex office of the land, then the Bole skin stands in waiting as the heir apparent. Then the next gate is the Kpembe division, to Tulu, then to Kusawgu and back to Wasipe. However, there are circumstances under which a gate could be skipped to the next gate in the line of succession.

These circumstances include the event whereby the heir apparent is physically or mentally incapacitated and is deemed not able to undergo the normal installation rites to make him a Yagbunwura. What it means however is that, when the seat becomes vacant again the next person to occupy it is the gate that was skipped unless the reason for skipping the particular gate still pertains. For example, the immediate past Yagbunwura came from Kpembe and going by the normal succession arrangements, the next Yagbunwura was to have come from Tuluwe. But the Tuluwewura then had advanced in age which made him physically and mentally incapacitated to undergo the installation processes including riding on horseback to qualify him as the Yagbunwura. Due to that reason, Tuluwe was skipped and the present Yagbunwura ascended to the throne from Kusawgu who was next in line.

What this means is that, in the event of the demise of the present Yagbunwura, the skin is reversed to Tuluwe if the sitting Tuluwewura is not incapacitated in any form at the time the vacancy occurs. From Tuluwe it will skip Kusawgu because they have had their turn already under the circumstance, then it goes to Wasipe and the rotation in the promotional ladder continues. According to the Tolodompewura, the skipping automatically disqualifies the chief that had been skipped from ascending to the Yagbun skin but does not in any way affect the divisional skin concerned.

In a similar arrangement, sub-divisional chiefs also inherit vacant skins of the divisions that finally get the Yagbun skin or end at the divisional level. This again does not apply to the female chiefs. The Wasipe division has three sub-divisions which can ascend the skin of the Wasipewura. They include the Tampulma, Hanga and Garma sub-divisions. Each of the three sub-divisions also has either three or two gates from which a prospective sub-divisional chief is gotten. The Tampulma sub-division has three gates. These gates are the Asiepe gate, Jentrepe gate and the Takorape gate.

The Hanga sub-division comprises the Tipkiripe, Jakpape, Ayamepe and the Kankrasupe gates. The Akosipe gate and the Adamape gate comprise the Garma sub-division. However, to qualify directly for the Wasipe skin, one must be an occupant of the sub-divisional gate skin of Yazori and coming from one of the three sub-divisions indicated. What this means is that, the Tampulma, Hanga and Garma sub-divisions move to occupy the Yazori skin on a rotational basis before they actually get to occupy the Wasipe Skin. The Asiepewura, the Jentrepewura and the Takorapewura also succeed the Tampulma Skin in a rotatory promotional ladder. For example, if you are from the Asieppe family, your line of succession will start as Asiepwura, to Tampulmawura, to Yazoriwura and to Wasipewura where you then wait to ascend to become the Yagbunwura. At every stage of the ladder, the prospective successor will have to wait at his present position until the succession system rotates to his turn.

The Kpembe division also has three sub-divisions that are eligible to the occupancy of the Kpembe Skin. These include the Singbing gate with the sub-divisional skin of Singbungwura, the Kanyase gate with the sub-divisional skin of Kanyasewura and the Lepo gate with the sub-divisional skin of Lepowura. These three sub-divisions move to occupy the Kpembe skin in a rotatory system in turns. This is quite different from what

pertains in the Wasipe division in two folds. One, each sub-division here has just one family from which the sub-chief can be selected. Secondly, the sub-divisional chiefs move direct to occupy the divisional skin without having to go through another step.

The Bole division also offers similar characteristics to the Wasipe and Kpembe. Like in the Wasipe and Kpembe divisions, the Bole division comprises three sub-divisional skins that take turns to ascend to the Bolewura skin. These skins are the Mandari skin designated the Mandariwura, the Jentilpe Skin designated the Jentilpewura and the Wulase skin designated the Wulasewura.

Among these three sub-divisional skins, the Mandariwura is considered the head skin and therefore it is the Mandari skin that automatically qualifies the occupant of the skin to the Bole divisional skin (Bolewura). What this means is that, the Jentilpewura and the Wulasewura are kept on hold until the Mandariwura moves to the Bole skin before either of them depending on a rotational promotional ladder then graduates to the Mandari Skin. It should be noted, however, that there are three recognized gates which qualify to ascend the Jentilpe and the Wulase skins. These gates are the Jagape gate, the Denkeripe gate and the Elope/Sarfope gate. The occupants of these three skins are promoted to the Jentilpe skin or the Wulase skin in times of vacancy on a rotational basis.

To ascend to the Tulewe divisional Skin, one has to occupy the sub-divisional gate skins of Banda being Bundawura from one of two gates. The two gates which are eligible to the Banda sub-divisional skin are the Latepe gate and the Jewupe gate. The two gates of Latepe and Jewupe ascend the throne of Bundawura on a rotational basis. For instance, the current Bundawura is from the Latepe gate and the next opportunity will go to the Jewupe gate. What it means is that, the sitting Tuluwewura who hails from the Jewupe gate will be succeeded by someone from the Latepe gate who is the sitting Bundawura.

The Kusawgu division exhibits similar characteristics in terms of succession with the Wasipe and the Bole divisions. This division has a sub-divisional skin that automatically fills in the vacant skin of Kusawgu. This is the Yapei skin entitled the Yapeiwura. This sub-division has four gates which are eligible to the Yapei skin. These include Japkape, Adamape, Mumunipe and Soalepe gates. These gates ascend to the sub-divisional skin of Yapeiwura through a strictly adhered rotational system. This rotational system of succession avoids unnecessary chieftaincy disputes and ensures continuity according to the Kusawguwura.

Similarly, various sub-divisions move to succeed the divisions of the council of elders or kingmakers. In Sonyo for example, three sub-divisions ascend the skin of Sonyowura. The Sapewura, the Takalpewura and the Kankumipewura succeed the throne of the Sonyowura on a promotional rotatory system. When one is promoted to the Sonyo skin the next in line gets ready as the heir apparent. In Damongo, there are two sub-chiefs who succeed the Damongowura in turns. They are the Lemupwura and the Dangepewura from the respective skins of Lemupe and Dangepe. Kanyawura in the Chori division is the only sub-chief who succeeds the throne of the Choriwura. In this case there is no rotation among gates. The moment you are installed the Kanyawura, you automatically move to the position of the Choriwura when a vacancy occurs. The Debrewura recides at Mpaha and he is succeeded by three sub-divisional chiefs. The Kanyenpewura, the Kapuasewura and the Abrasewura are promoted on a rotational basis to the skin of the Debrewura.

The Jakpapewura, Kugoropewura and Bangpewura are the three sub-divisional chiefs that move to succeed the Mankpanwura in turns. At the Kulaw division, the three sub-divisional chiefs of Jewupewura, Chapewura and Kibiapewura inherit the Kulaw-wura in turns. The Kulaw-wura resides in either Kijewu or Kinyange within the Kpembe traditional division. The Kpansheguwura is succeeded by the two skins of Chemaoripewura and

Dirigupewura. These two sub-chiefs inherit the Kpanshegu divisional skin on rotation. The two sub-divisional chiefs of Gbansopewura and Dangepewura succeed the divisional skin of the Busunuwura. Finally, at the Buipe division, the two sub-divisional chiefs of Dinkeripewura and Lebopewura succeed the Buipewura skin in turns. The Buipewura is essentially central to the Gonja political system because of the role he plays during the enskinment process of the Yagbunwura. The lieutenant to the Buipewura in this regard is the Kagbapewura.

What is worthy to note here is that, in this category of sub-divisional chiefs, their succession to higher office is once. When the chief is promoted from the sub-divisional level to occupy a divisional skin by way of succession, he ends at the divisional level and remains their till he dies or he is removed even though the later scarcely occurs. For example, the lebopwura after moving to occupy the Buipe skin remains as the Buipewura till he dies. As such, the highest office for this category of sub-divisional chiefs is at the level of the divisional skin. But in the case of the other five divisions which have the opportunity to succeed the throne of the Yagbunwura, their sub-divisional chiefs have two promotional skins and in some instances three promotional skins as the case may be, to move to occupy and the Yagbun skin being the highest.

It was observed that in all these processes of succession, the kingmakers vary. It is generally agreed as confirmed by the interviews conducted that, when it comes to the nomination of a chief for the position of the Yagbunwura, it is the Sonyonwura who does the appointment in consultation with the other eight members of the council of elders or kingmakers. After the appointment and on the day of the installation, the Yagbunwura elect is enskinned at Nyanga by the Buipewura acting through his lieutenant, the Bagbapewura. Also, at the sub-divisional level, it is the divisional chiefs who make the appointment and enskinment from a number of applicants who approach the divisional chief from the respective family or gate of inheritance.

However, what is not clear and could not be agreed on even by the council of elders was the person who is responsible for the nomination and enskinment of chiefs at the divisional level. While some contend that it is the duty of the Yagbunwura, others suggest it is the duty of the Kasawulewura (Tendana) to nominate and enskin the prospective chief to the appropriate division. This conflict of opinions could be realized at the Damongo division following the demise of the Damongowura in 2016. The Yagbunwura saw it as his duty to nominate and enskin the new Damongowura and went ahead to appoint and enskin a Damongowura.

The Kasawulewura also supported by a section of the elders nominated and enskinned somebody as the Damongowura. So, at the time of the field work, there were two Damongowuras in Damongo; one by the Yagbunwura and the other by the Kasawulewura. One would have thought that, with a well-structured system of succession where in most cases the successor to a vacant skin can easily be determined even before the vacancy occurs, the system would be spared of any succession disputes. But that was not to be. The Damongo case indicates that the system of succession, though well laid out, is not perfect after all. By and large, irrespective of the weaknesses, the Gonja system of succession happens to be one of the most transparent and reliable systems in northern Ghana. The resilience of their political system and the fact that the Gonja chieftaincy system has very few cases of succession disputes points to the strength of the system of succession that is in place.

On the female line however, what is seen to be a clear structure of succession from one skin to the other in a promotional basis on the line of the chieftaincy does not exist. The female chief is appointed to her position once and she exercises the authority of that office till she dies. In this case, the positions of most male skins are predetermined by the structure and nobody can do anything about the succession process. So, in terms of a

vacancy the occupant to the vacant skin is always almost known by the players and the processes may just be a formality.

From figure 1, the movement of the arrows indicate the succession line for only the male chiefs at the various levels. The bottom of the figure shows the names of the communities which constitutes the royal gates at the base of the structure. The second layer from the bottom consists of communities that are higher in rank to the gates below. The second layer communities are also lower in authority to the communities and chiefs above them who can succeed in cyclical rotation to be the Yagbowura (the King of the Gonja people). Even though the structure clearly shows provision for women representation through which the wuriche can participate in decision making, there is a marked difference between the succession processes among male and female chiefs. While male chiefs succeed through a hierarchically promotional structure, female chiefs assume a permanent office where they are expected to exercise their authority till death. The successor on the male line is almost usually known. On the female line, however, the succession to vacant position is usually done through an appointment by the respective male chief under whose division the vacancy has occurred.

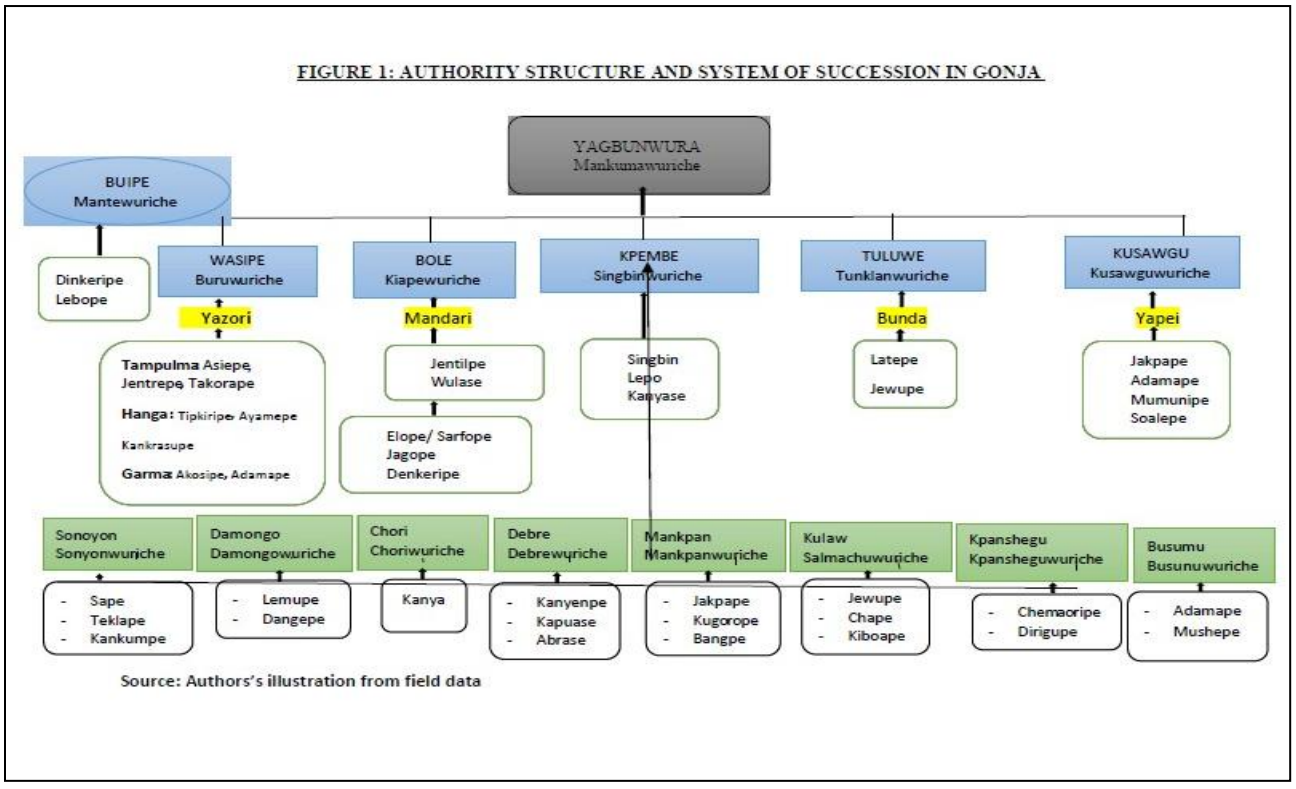


Figure 1. Authority structure and system of succession in Gonja

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study contribute to the general discourse on traditional political systems in Africa. The study illustrates that, the traditional authority structure in Gonja is woven around the chieftaincy institution. The authority system is structured and organised along both female and male lines from the village through

the sub-divisions and divisions up to the paramountcy. The presence of female chiefs here distinguishes it from most African traditional political systems. Even at the lowest level of the community, there exists a kind of traditional authority structure which is almost always unnoticed from outside.

A detailed hierarchical structure of the Gonja political system therefore, shows a gendered organisation of male and female power and influence. However, there are marked differences in the system of succession between the wuriche and the male chiefs. Whereas, the system of succession on the male line is on a promotional circulatory basis, the system of succession on the line of the Wuriche is not necessarily, and usually not promotional or circulatory. What is therefore, clear about the structure of authority in Gonja social organisation is that, the paramount chief and divisional chiefs who often receive the attention from external agents and agencies are only a 'tip of the iceberg' of a much bigger institution.

The findings of the study show that, the organisation of the political structure of the Gonja illustrates political continuity. The findings also illustrate an integration of traditional political system with modern political governance structures.

It is recommended that the national government and other development agents should recognise and respect the arrangement of authority through the chieftaincy institution in their interaction with the Gonja society. Government through the Ministry of Chieftaincy and traditional affairs should engage the traditional authorities in Gonja so that the structure and oraganisation of this institution is well documented according to Gonja custom and traditions in order to maintain the resilience of the institution.

References

Barnard, I.C. (1938), *The Functions of the Executive*, Harvard University Press.

Braimah, J.A., Tomlinson H.H & Amankatia, O. (1997), *History and Traditions of the Gonja*. University of Calgary Press.

Brydon, L. (1996), "Women Chiefs and Power in the Volta Region of Ghana", *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 78-99. https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1996.10756481

Coser, L.A. (1971), *Masters of sociological thought*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Easton, D. (1953), *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Fayorsey, C. (2006), "Gender, Culture and Governance": Ghanaian Queen mothers as Leaders in Development, in: Odotei I. K. and Awedoba, A. (eds), *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance and Development*. Sub-Saharan Publications, Accra.

Fortes, M. and Evans-Pritchard (eds) (1940), *African Political Systems*. Yale University Press. New Haven & London.

Goody E. and Goody, J. (1967), *The Circulation of Women and Children in Northern Ghana*. Man, New Series. London. https://doi.org/10.2307/2799489

Goody, J. (1966), *Succession to high office*, Oxford University Press,

Heywood, A. (2000), *Key Concepts in Politics. Houndmills*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jonah, K. (2003), "The Electoral Response of Ghana's Traditional Rulers to their Subordination and Alienation in Local Governance", in: N. Amponsah, Boafo-Arthur Kwame (eds), *Local Government in Ghana*. Livog Limited, Accra.

Lasswell, H. (1936), *Politics: Who Gets What, When, H*ow. New York University Press, New York.

Lentz, C. (2006), *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, Edinburgh. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748626847

Lentz, C. (2003), Stateless Societies or Chiefdoms: A Debate among Dagara Intellectuals. Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, Edinburgh.

Okonjo, K. (1976), The Dual Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo women and community politics in Midwestern Nigeria, in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, (eds), *Women in Africa*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 45-58.

Ranger, T. (1984), "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", in: Hobsbawm, E. and T. Rangers (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambrideg, pp. 211-261. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636.006

Rattray, R.S. (1932), "The Tribes of Ashanti Hinterland", *African Affairs*, Vol. 30 No. 118, pp. 40-57. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a101640

Riesebrodt, M. (1999), "Charisma in Max Weber's sociology of religion", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 29, pp. 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1999.0175

Sarantakos, S. (2004), *Social Research*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Sesay, A. (2014), "African Governance Systems in the Pre-Colonial and Post-Independence Periods: *Enduring Lessons and Opportunities for the Youth in Africa*", Discussion paper, Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS).

Spencer, M.E. (1970), "Weber on legitimate norms of authority", *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp, 123-134. https://doi.org/10.2307/588403

Sudarkasa, N. (1987), "The status of women in indigenous African societies", in: Rosalyn Terborg-penn (ed.), *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*. Washington, D.C., Harvard University Press, pp. 25-41.

Weber, M. (1958), "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule", In: *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions*, 4 (1), pp, 1-11. Translated by Hans Gerth.