Youth and Social Navigation in the Alavanyo and Nkonya Land Conflict in Ghana

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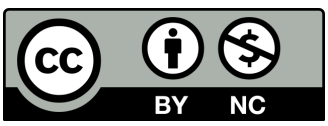
Abstract

This article examines the agency of youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya, and how they navigate the social, economic, and political difficulties of life in the context of an ongoing land conflict dating back to the early 1900s. In Ghana, because land is the basis of economic potential, spirituality, identity, history, rootedness, and belonging for groups and individuals, it has become a major contested entity, producing many intractable conflicts. In Alavanyo and Nkonya, the youth who are at the centre of the conflict have had their futures made opaque and truncated by many challenging situations. Over the years, traditional dispute resolution approaches led by chiefs, court rulings, and mediation committees set up by the state of Ghana, as well as by the UNDP, aimed at resolving the land conflict, have all been unsuccessful. This context has pushed the youth to develop a process of social navigation through farming, illegal marijuana cultivation, illicit timber logging, and the *okada* transport business to cope with the challenges of everyday life. The article contends that, while the area has lands that are fertile for agrarian activities, the youth are unable to harness the potential of the land because of the ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Youth, social navigation, land conflict, Alavanyo-Nkonya, Ghana

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v32i1.895



About the author

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Introduction

In Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, because land is not only an economic resource but also the basis of spirituality, identity, history, rootedness, and belonging for both groups and individuals, it has become the most contested entity and the basis of many protracted conflicts. This explains why land use practices engender ambivalence, because while the appropriation of land can bring progress to communities and individuals, it can also be the basis of protracted disputes when misappropriated, especially when this is done in a manner that threatens the educational and socioeconomic prospects of the youth (see Asamoah 2014).

The literature on the involvement of youth in land conflicts shows that youth may not only act to defend and/or preserve family or community lands, but in some cases they are also complicit in the violence and killings associated with these land conflicts (see Amanor 2010; Lentz 2003; Tsikata and Seini 2004; Tonah 2006; Greiner 2013).

In Ghana, working among the Dagara on the Ghanaian border and the Sisala on the Burkina Faso border, Lentz (2003) demonstrates how a colonial boundary drawn in 1898 later became the grounds for a land conflict involving the Dagara youth, who contended that the linear boundary usurped their land rights and their rights to fish in a pond located in Sisala territory. Similarly, Amanor's research (2010) in the cocoa growing areas of the Eastern Region of Ghana shows how the youth in these areas stood up to family heads in the distribution of family land and the attempts by some chiefs and elders to give away community lands to foreigners for their own personal gain (see also Tonah 2006, 167). These cases illustrate that young people have always been involved in land conflicts in Ghana.

This article focuses on youth in the two local communities of Alavanyo and Nkonya, in the Volta and Oti Regions respectively, and how they navigate the social, economic, and political challenges of life in the context of an ongoing land conflict dating back to the early 1900s. The Nkonya-Alavanyo land conflict has remained unresolved to date, has resulted in massive loss of lives and property, fractured social and economic life in the area, and impacted negatively on the youth.[1] This land dispute has marginalized opportunities for social mobility, social recognition, and a good future for most of the youth, who are constantly navigating unpredictable circumstances and a fluid environment in order to make meaning in their lives (see Di Nunzio 2017, 2). Thus, this paper analyses how the ongoing land conflict has created social, economic, and political challenges for the communities of Alavanyo and Nkonya, but, especially for the youth of these communities, who bear the greater burden of these challenges. The paper argues that while the area has enormous economic and social opportunities for the youth to harness, many are actually unable to access these opportunities because of the ongoing land conflict.

In Ghana, scholars such as Lentz (1995), Van Gyampo (2012), and Bob-Milliar (2011) have conceptualized the notion of youth and showed how youth involvement in state politics and local development discourses significantly shapes the development of their communities. In the specific case of Alavanyo and Nkonya, the concept of 'youth' as used in this paper, and framed against the backdrop of the daunting challenges of the land conflict, denotes persons who have the ability to fight and defend the land, and are sometimes ready to shoot and kill their opponents for the sake of protecting or defending self, family, and land. Constructed this way, the youth are those between the ages of 15 and 50 years.

[1] Until 2019 Nkonya was part of the Volta Region. Today, it is part of the Oti Region, while Alavanyo remains part of the Volta Region.

The paper draws on Henrik Vigh's (2006) concept of 'social navigation' to elucidate how the youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya experience their socioeconomic context and the decisions they have made to respond to challenges of joblessness, the inaccessibility of land, family issues, social mobility, and a general sense of unpredictability in the practice of 'everyday' life. By the everyday, I am referring to "social and cultural acts and processes that people consider a normal part of life, and draw attention to the ways in which people seek to influence, organize and appropriate the structures that affect their lives" (De Certeau 1988, 17).

The article starts with a presentation of the data and methodology of the fieldwork from which it was derived. This is followed by a short overview of the social relations between Alavanyo and Nkonya, drawing attention to the genesis of the protracted land conflict. The next section presents the situation of youth in the crisis and how they navigate the socioeconomic challenges engendered by the ongoing land conflict. The conclusion then follows.

Fieldwork and methodology

Data for this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2014, 2016, and 2019 in Nkonya and Alavanyo. Although the fieldwork broadly focused on the land conflict, this paper reports on the aspects of the data that particularly relate to the experiences and challenges of the youth arising from their involvement in the conflict. I interacted with the youth during social interactive activities such as marriages, funerals, and festivals, and accompanied some to their farms. These encounters offered me a lot of information about how the youth try to successfully navigate the social and economic disorder in the area to (re)-define their subjectivities and identities, and to live meaningful lives.

I engaged with two groups of informants – primary and secondary. The primary informants, whom I visited regularly, comprised four youth leaders from each of the frontline villages (communities that are constantly attacking each other) of the two groups, the two paramount chiefs and three sub-chiefs from each community, and the paramount queen mothers in both the Alavanyo and Nkonya communities. These participants were chosen because of their positions and knowledge of the history and dynamics of youth agency in the land conflict. The secondary informants, whom I visited periodically, consisted of youth I encountered randomly, elders who were well-versed in matters of the dispute, and a few non-indigenes and leaders of the military who were stationed in the area to maintain law and order. In the different periods of my encounter with the primary and secondary informants, it was evident that the two communities were worried about the lack of social progress in the area, but especially about the future of the youth if the land conflict remained unresolved.

The two groups and the land conflict

Available written records and oral narratives show that the Nkonya were living in the area, including parts of the land in dispute, around the 16th century; the Alavanyo arrived later, in the early 1800s, and were warmly received by the Nkonya (Lilley 1925; Dzathor 1998). Social relations between the two groups were cordial, so they intermarried, and celebrated funerals and other social interactive activities together. In Alavanyo and Nkonya, land (*anyigba* in Ewe or *usulu* in Nkonya) is the basis of their existence and as such "punctuates the events of everyday life and inspires how men and women appropriate the land to meet their needs and define their relationships with neighbours and nature" (Gariba 2017, 34). Around the early 1900s, some Alavanyo farmers were alleged to have improperly entered land belonging to the Nkonya, i.e.

they failed to perform the customary rites that would allow them to use the land. At that time, a land seeker was required to provide a sheep, drinks, and an amount of money to the land-owning family through the family head, and the land was given to the seeker before the family head and the chief and elders, who acted as witnesses, so that the whole transaction was a community affair.

This omission led to a land boundary dispute that weakened the social relations between the two groups, making it extremely difficult for them to live peacefully together (see Ampene 2011; Dzathor 1998). Since the 1900s, there have been violent clashes between the two groups in 1923, 1983, 2003, 2004, 2012, and 2013. In these violent clashes, the youth from both communities were made to believe that the conflict was about community land which was being encroached upon by 'strangers', so their collective agency to fight to defend the land was paramount to their wellbeing and to the survival of the whole community.

The underlying reasons for the conflict during the 1900s have evolved, however, such that today, the major issues driving the land dispute have very little to do with a boundary dispute, but everything to do with court verdicts, ethnocentrism, divisive state politics, autochthony narratives, the legacies of unavenged targeted killings, and the illicit farming of marijuana, among other factors (see Asamoah 2014; Penu and Essaw 2019). The land in conflict, which covers an area of 2,616.23 hectares, is good for agrarian activities, has some good timber species, and has unsubstantiated deposits of mercury, gold, and clay (Gariba 2017).

In 1913, while the Germans were still in control of the area, Hans Gruner, a cartographer, drew a map in an attempt to settle the conflict, but failed for two reasons. Firstly, this map did not make sense to the Nkonya and Alavanyo, because among them, land boundaries are drawn not with maps but with local trees known as *Ntombe* in Nkonya and *Anya* in Ewe. Secondly, the two communities saw the colonial officials as using their imperial power to interfere in a local matter of which they had little knowledge to properly handle. However, since that time, court rulings, traditional dispute resolution approaches, mediation committees set up by the state of Ghana, as well as by the UNDP, and aimed at resolving the land conflict, have been unsuccessful. The unsuccessful efforts to resolve the dispute have deepened the social clefts between the two groups and led to a breakdown in economic activities and social life, and a weakening of the power of chiefs and state authorities who were expected to offer leadership and to help end the dispute. The youth, who were particularly disappointed in the chiefs, and frustrated at their marginal influence in community matters, began to disregard the authority of chiefs and state actors, and take matters into their own hands. In the 1980s, which was the most violent period, this practice of 'taking matters into their own hands' led to a culture of radicalization among the youth. In Alavanyo, the radicalization led to the killing of a paramount chief, Togbe Anku Atakora V, who "was accused of selling ammunition to the Nkonya, giving them protection and custody in his palace, and was charged that his mother came from Nkonya" (Tsikata and Seini 2004, 89). In Nkonya, the story was much the same, as the local youth also accused the paramount chief of being too soft in the way he dealt with the Alavanyo.

Within the authority structures of local communities in Ghana, not least among the Alavanyo and Nkonya, the rebellious reactions of the youth amounted to contempt of the high office of the chiefs, whom they were customarily required to obey. Amanor (2010) demonstrates that in most Ghanaian cultures the youth are generally amenable to the authority of chiefs and elders. But, in societies that are caught up in conflicts, such as the one involving the Alavanyo and the Nkonya,

the youth, in most cases, often determine the arcs and contours of the conflict, and have thus challenged established cultural and social hierarchies and power relations between the youth and older people such as family heads, chiefs, and elders (Amanor 2010). Today, while the actions of some youth may be seen to be promoting acts of violence and hostility in the area, there is also a clear intent on the part of others to compel the chiefs and the state to resolve the land dispute so they can access the fertile land for productive ends. Lamenting on the state of affairs in the area, one of my primary informants, Kofi Okuleda, aged 75, from Nkonya-Tayi, argued that "the land dispute has spoiled everything for us. In the past we produced a lot of cocoa and foodstuffs here. And we related well with each other, and that is why we intermarried. Today, we can hardly do anything together."

The youth and the context of crisis in Alavanyo and Nkonya

The events following the irresolution of the land conflict and the reactions of the youth created a crisis, i.e. a context of violence, hatred, and killings, 'normalised' by people, but especially by the youth, as the anticipated reality of life (Oosterom 2018, 9). The pervasiveness of the crisis and the prolonged state of unpredictability seemed to have deprived the male youth, especially, of the economic independence they needed to "acquire wives, build their own compounds, and become economically viable agents" (De Waal and Argenti 2002, 125).[2]

This observation particularly reinforces Vigh's (2008) concept of social and personal crisis that youth experience and navigate in conflict societies. He argues that "whereas social crisis relates to dynamics within political, economic and social processes, personal crisis is associated with a state of being, defined by the experience of an aggravated limitation of agency, a truncation of horizons and opacity of futures and possibilities" (2008, 13). In my estimation, Vigh's idea of social and personal crisis resonates with the way youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya currently navigate the uncertainties and deprivations of everyday life.

In Nkonya and Alavanyo, social crisis is evident, first, in the continued refusal of the Alavanyo to accept the court verdicts[3], second, in the inability of the chiefs to leverage their powers to end the land conflict, and third, in the specific agencies of wealthy individuals and local politicians. These three political and socioeconomic factors have inevitably created crises for the people in the area.

The court verdicts: legal victory is not social victory

A major issue constituting a social and personal crisis for the two communities concerns the continuous rejection by the Alavanyo of the court verdicts. While the court verdicts have given the Nkonya a legal victory, they did not offer them a social victory, i.e. the right to own and use the land in dispute. This stalemate has created a situation where lawyers of both communities continue to use their power or leverage to encourage entrenched positions, not only concerning the legal issues of the conflict, but also in relation to other pertinent issues. Thus, to date, the Nkonya communities feel deeply aggrieved that they are unable to access the fertile land they have always believed belongs

[2] Durham (2004, 593) posits that in Botswana, "to call someone a youth is to position him or her in terms of a variety of social attributes, including not only age but also independence-dependence, authority, rights, abilities, knowledge, responsibilities, and so on".

[3] From 1953, when the Nkonya first took the land matter to court, till 1980 when the court matters ended, there have been five (5) court cases, all of which the Nkonya won, but they have not been able to take possession of the land.

to them. A youth leader in Nkonya lamented: "our inability to access the land is upsetting the youth whose farming lands, passed on to them by their forefathers, are underutilized because of the land dispute".[4] In an effort to navigate this challenge, in 2004, the leadership of the Nkonya Youth Association addressed a letter to the Mediation Committee charged with the responsibility of helping to resolve the land conflict, stressing that:

> It is the view of the Association that what is left to be done (which the people of Alavanyo are failing and or refusing to do) is for the Alavanyo people to comply with the judgments of the courts. It may not be necessary to state that it is in the interest of society that the judgments of the courts of competent jurisdiction must be respected.[5]

This demand did not yield the desired result. As agrarian communities, lack of access to fertile land amounts to obliterating the possibilities of social progress for the people, and especially for the youth. This is a major issue feeding the sporadic acts of violence for which the area is well known.

Community relations of chiefs, youth, and families

In Ghana, chiefs wield a lot of power over the jurisdiction under their authority. This authority can however, be contested by their subjects, especially when they are perceived to have failed to bring development to the people (Kleist 2011). In Alavanyo and Nkonya, the failure of the chiefs to leverage their power to help resolve the land conflict so that their respective communities can use the land for productive ends is a major social challenge producing different reactions among the youth, especially those whose families own lands in the area in conflict. Among the people of Nkonya and Alavanyo, although land is owned not by the chiefs (as is the case in some parts of Ghana) but by families and clans, chiefs, as community leaders, are compelled by the vows of their office to stand behind the people and to assist them in resolving land disputes. When they fail to play this role effectively, they are seen as betraying the trust of the people, and in some cases, they could even be deposed. However, during fieldwork, the chiefs I interviewed argued that a major difficulty in attracting the state and nonstate actors, as well as the local support needed to end the land conflict, is the culture of lawlessness and the intransigence of the youth in heeding calls to eschew acts of violence and attacks, which are sometimes also directed at state security personnel stationed in the area. However, Kwami Lumor, a youth leader from Alavanyo-Wudidi, disagrees with this perspective, saying "the intransigence of the youth to change the way they perceive matters of the conflict emanates from the support they continue to get from some of the chiefs and elders". This disturbing contradiction feeds directly into the persistence of the conflict. Additionally, during fieldwork in May 2019, a 76 year old man, Efo Kwabla Dunya, who hails from Alavanyo-Kpeme, opined that: "in this land conflict, families who have lost youth, mothers, fathers and siblings are deeply hurt and are bent on retaliating the death of their relations".[6] Today, it appears that the hurt and pain emanating from the loss of close family members explains the continuous "sniper and guerrilla-style killings taking place in the area" (Azumah 2017). The youth were often accused by the chiefs and the police in the area of carrying out these killings, although some

[4] Interview with Yaw Addae, May 2019, at Nkonya-Tayi.
[5] This letter was written by the Kumasi branch of the Nkonya Youth Association on June 29, 2004, and is in possession of the youth leaders of Nkonya-Tayi, but I was able to make a copy.
[6] Interview conducted at Alavanyo-Kpeme, June 2019.

of my informants told me the killers are difficult to find, because sometimes they act on the instructions of powerful actors who will do anything to hide their identity.

Specific agencies of politicians and wealthy individuals

In Nkonya and Alavanyo, the involvement of local politicians and wealthy individuals in the conflict is another major source of anger and frustration, not only among the youth but among the wider communities (cf. Yakohene 2012, 81). The actions of these actors particularly affect the welfare and prospects of the youth, a situation one of my participants, who identified with the concerns of the youth, lamented as follows:

> During elections, our politicians tell us to vote for them and they will bring us jobs, and help resolve the land dispute so we can use the land. But over the years, they have failed to fulfil these promises.

This statement captures the general lamentation of the youth, although there are other youth who, by virtue of aligning themselves with certain political actors, are able to navigate their way out of joblessness by benefiting from jobs and monetary tokens from the politicians. Dawson's work among youth in South Africa affirms this assertion as she demonstrates that in the South African setting, the youth are quick to find creative ways to align themselves with powerful political actors than with any form of social network in order to make ends meet (Dawson 2014).

In Nkonya and Alavanyo, the weak political, economic, and social structures of the communities, and the truncation of the agency of the youth, have provided politicians and wealthy individuals the grounds to manipulate the youth, whose long 'waithood', i.e. a suspended period between childhood and adulthood, has kept most of these adults as children, socially speaking (Honwana 2012).

The agency of wealthy individuals has been a rather ambivalent one. During fieldwork, some of my informants related that, in the 2000s when the conflict re-escalated and brought life to a standstill, one of the wealthy individuals from Alavanyo provided good drinking water for the community, while another, in Nkonya, built a clinic to improve community healthcare delivery. To date, these two projects are still serving the social needs of the two communities. However, the overall activities of the wealthy individuals in relation to the conflict have been largely undesirable. Oral and written sources show they were very instrumental in the supply of arms, ammunition, and monies in the 1980s and 2000s for the youth who were pushed into the thick of the conflict ("Security Agencies make a big find on Alavanyo-Nkonya feud," Ghanaian Times June 12, 2003). The supply of arms, monies, and logistics by wealthy individuals to the youth to engage in the conflict has been very central to the dynamics of the conflict, and reveals how the youth (because they are in the front line) are exploited by powerful actors to advance hidden interests, using the land conflict as proxy.

Furthermore, the increasing joblessness in the area also serves as an important index of personal crises among the youth. Among the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, a jobless youth is easily associated with theft, banditry, criminality, and violence. This perception has challenged many youth to try to get gainful employment so as to avoid being tagged as social misfits. Currently, in the two communities, while some youth are able to engage in petty trade, small scale farming, organizing funerals, marrying, and maintaining families through social network of relations and parents, many others are unable to do so. Those who have relations or friends in the urban centres of Accra, Koforidua, and Kumasi have

migrated to these areas to try to find jobs to improve their economic standing and to periodically send remittances to their mothers, fathers, and siblings in the village. However, the youth also know that life in the city presents formidable challenges which they constantly have to navigate if they wish to achieve their dreams.

Social navigation and everyday youth responses to the context of crisis

Social navigation, as defined by Henrik Vigh, denotes "the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along" (Vigh 2009, 420). In a related work concerning young people's agency in the war in Guinea Bissau, Vigh talks about social navigation as "the way agents guide their lives through troublesome social and political circumstances" (Vigh 2006, 13). Vigh's conceptualization of social navigation was inspired by Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of 'life chances' (Dahrendorf 1981). However, while Vigh used the concept of social navigation within the context of war and conflict, social navigation can be applied to different settings such as education, religion, mobility, and politics (see, for example, Petricevic 2015).

For the youth in Nkonya and Alavanyo, social navigation is primarily about how they navigate their way out of everyday economic and social difficulties that have rendered their futures opaque. To navigate one's way out of economic and social difficulties entails that a youth is not only physically strong, but also spiritually strong; they attain spiritual strength through consulting diviners, *afakala*, pastors, or other spiritual agents. In the two communities, it is believed that life is "embedded in an intricate network of visible and invisible forces" (Hecht and Simone 1994, 77), and as such it is important that one is able to partake in the life of the invisible realm so as to take control over the affairs of life in the physical realm.

Abbink and van Kessel (2005) argue that in contexts of conflict or crisis, one can expect different responses. One response they talked about is "the 'agency' response which emphasizes the active role of youth in finding their own answers to the problems they face, and thus having them shape their own destiny" (2005, 8). Given the challenging context I have described above, and the lack of social progress in the area, the youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya have become aware that their long 'waithood' (at least for majority of them) for adult life can only change when they begin to find their own answers to the problems confronting them, so they can shape their own destiny. This process is what Scheper-Hughes (2008) describes as 'tactics of resilience', i.e. a display of hardiness and toughness among youth in dealing with the adversities of everyday life. Kwaku Asare, a youth leader from Nkonya-Tayi, echoes the sentiments of the youth in these words:

> The unpredictable conditions of social life in the area and the inability of the two groups to resolve the land dispute has *broken our life into pieces* (emphasis mine). But I know that the youth in Nkonya as well as those in Alavanyo are gifted, tough and hardworking. We will find ways to 'manage' our life.[7]

Marijuana cultivation and everyday forms of survival

During fieldwork in May 2019, I discovered that one of the ways the youth navigate family

[7] Interview conducted at Nkonya-Tayi, May 2016.

and personal economic hardships is to get involved in the marijuana business. The marijuana cultivators often defended their illegal business by arguing that "the sheep eat where they are tethered", which means they must make the most out of what they can find in their environment. In fact, one of them told me, "farming 'wee' is better than stealing".

In Ghana, the cultivation and use of marijuana has been proscribed as a crime and is punishable by law. However, in some communities of Nkonya and Alavanyo, the cultivation of marijuana (popularly known as 'wee' or 'ganja') has become very attractive to the youth, who argue that they engage in it because they have no jobs, and although marijuana cultivation is tedious and risky (because one can be arrested), it offers them 'good money'.[8] One of the chiefs in the area told me: "We know that some of the youth are smoking 'wee' and some are making money out of it, but we can't stop them because there are no jobs in the area". The sensitivity of the marijuana business is such that it once led to a standoff between the cultivators and a police team, dispatched to the area from Ho to destroy marijuana farms in Alavanyo-Dzogbedze ("Volta Region Police Boss Transferred over Alavanyo Guns," GhanaWeb.com, January 15, 2019).

However, I was later told that the senior police chief who dispatched the police team was also involved in the cultivation, along with some youth, but felt cheated when harvesting time came, hence the attempt to arrest every other cultivator of marijuana in the area. Unfortunately, the clash resulted in fatalities, as the combined efforts of the police and soldiers stationed in the area, who had gone there to help maintain order, led to the death of two youth ("Volta Regional Police Commander Transferred after Alavanyo clashes," TheGhanareport.com, January 22, 2019).

This narrative is an eloquent illustration of how economic, social, and political crisis has created personal crises for the youth, leading some to lose their lives, while also destroying the livelihoods of many others (Yakohene 2012).

The cultivators further contended that through the marijuana farming, they are able to employ jobless youth and reduce unemployment and its accompanied ills in the area. Indeed, I saw youth between the ages of 14 and 16 in some of the communities, wearing small bags on their shoulders containing marijuana and selling it to clients. Thus, they saw the marijuana farming as 'legitimate' business to 'make ends meet', although they were aware that they could be prosecuted if caught by or reported to security officers. Today, however, a major worry for many families, youth leaders, chiefs, and concerned citizens is not just about the cultivation of marijuana, but also its consumption among the youth. While statistics on how many youth are actually involved in the business and in smoking marijuana have been hard to come by, the practice is gaining traction, and is thus affecting the education of the youth and giving the two communities a bad name (see Tsikata and Seini 2004).

Additionally, in an effort to reverse the dismal economic conditions in which they are embedded, some of the youth are engaged in the illegal timber business with the complicity of some chiefs, although today, continuous logging has drastically reduced the number of timber species in the area. While the youth agreed that illegal logging was destroying both the forest belt and the fertility of the land, they claimed they were unable to stop the practice because that was one way to find something to eat. As one of my informants put it, "the youth who are engaged in illegal logging are urging the military to leave the area so they can have the freedom to do what they like".[9] It appeared

[8] In Ghana, there are a number of communities where marijuana cultivation is big business; thus, what is taking place in Nkonya and Alavanyo is only a fraction of a larger issue which the state has so far not been able to deal with.

[9] Interview with Peter Deku, at Alavanyo-Kpeme, May

that for the jobless youth, illegal logging was a major path to navigating the poor economic conditions that have truncated their opportunities for social mobility, especially in meeting human basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.

In Africa, as the work of Vigh (2008), Oosterom (2018), Amanor (1999), and Di Nunzio (2017) has shown, in many ways, youth who are locked in intractable conflicts or chronic conditions of social and economic deprivation will always try to find their own answers to their predicament. This has been the case for Nkonya and Alavanyo, where, because of the economic hardships, the youth who were involved in illegal logging or marijuana cultivation were ready to engage in gun battle with the police or soldiers when the latter tried to stop them (Tsikata and Seini 2004; Azumah 2017; Paalo 2017). The use of guns among youth in the two communities is no news, especially among the Alavanyo, who are known for their giftedness and ingenuity in producing some of the finest guns (known locally as Tukpui, Apirim, or Klosasa). Besides, in this area, to know how to shoot is a culturally required skill for a youth, and a way of defining yourself as a man (Gariba 2017, 233–234). Today, while the production of small arms (which is done in secret for lack of licenses) has declined, the use of guns continues to pose a major challenge to law enforcement authorities in the area. However, my observations also showed that, for the hardworking youth, the limitations on opportunities to find work is not a denial or a truncation of possibilities. The story of Abla Nkulenu, a youth from Alavanyo, lends credence to this: "In spite of the dispute, I am able to cultivate different crops on the small land I have, and have been able to take my two children to schools in the bigger towns of Ho and Accra".[10] In this sense, for the youth, social navigation emerges not just as a theoretical framing of their daily struggles, but also as a practical way to redefine difficult social conditions into productive ends through creativity, innovation, and invention.

Furthermore, in Alavanyo and Nkonya, because the land is fertile and food crops do well, youth who want to work and improve their living conditions have taken to rice farming. Anthony Tordzro, a young farmer in Alavanyo-Wudidi, told me this: "Today there is an increase in rice production in the area because some of us are involved in rice farming. Our rice is good and sells well in the neighbouring cities and towns".[11] Tordzro's sentiments demonstrate the efforts of the youth to improve their economic standing in spite of the grinding poverty in the area. In this way, they hoped to be able to live adult lives and to gain some social standing and respect in their communities. This means that, while the social conditions may seem opaque and their futures truncated, some youth were able to mobilize their talents and gifts to overcome their deprived conditions.

In another attempt to improve their economic conditions, some unemployed youth were also engaged in *okada,* a form of business in which motorbikes are used as a public transport system in the two communities because of the bad roads. *Okada* is readily available, cheap, fast, and can take one to the door of one's house. In contemporary Ghana, *okada* is illegal. but the lack of jobs for the increasing number of youth has gradually turned what is illegal into an acceptable business, even in the cities, where it is done in the full glare of the police, who are supposed to arrest and prosecute offenders. Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang (2012) argue that okada has become a ubiquitous transportation option because of its low startup capital and operational costs, and its large patronage.

Today, in Ghana, and not least in Nkonya and Alavanyo, *okada* has become a

2019.

[10] Interview with Abla Nkulenu at Alavanyo-Kpeme, May 2019.

[11] Interview at Alavanyo-Wudidi, May 2019.

micro-economic survival strategy developed by the unemployed youth as a creative way of navigating their way out of joblessness in a country where the unemployment rate is high. A wealthy youth (according to local standards) in Nkonya, who had three motorbikes and hired them out to other youth, told me *okada* was "a source of employment for the youth and a way to help each other even if the returns are meagre". This creative arrangement for socially navigating everyday challenges to meet economic needs expressed how the youth in Nkonya and Alavanyo, like others in other parts of Ghana, try to find their own answers to difficulties of life.

In Ghana, from the time of independence until today, youth associations have been instrumental in their advocacy for development projects and other pursuitsin their communities. But while the youth are a formidable force in local and state politics, individuals within these groups have also used the group to gain, for example, political office and other benefits, as Lentz demonstrates in her work on Youth Associations in northern Ghana (Lentz 1995). In Alavanyo and Nkonya, the activities of the Youth Associations could be described as being ambivalent. On the one hand, their activities were productive and developmental, but on the other hand, their activities were inimical to efforts aimed at promoting peace and social progress in the area. For example, in 1997, it was the appeal of the Alavanyo Youth Association that encouraged the central government to set up the Acquah Committee to investigate the land dispute and suggest ways of resolveing it (see the letter by Kwame Dzathor, Vice President, Alavanyo Youth Association, *Ghanaian Times* November 15, 1997). Additionally, during the clashes between the two groups from 2011–2013, it was the Alavanyo Youth Association that called on the then president, John Dramani Mahama to personally intervene and end the ongoing land dispute ("President Mahama: No Peace, No Development," *GhanaWeb.com*, August 8, 2013). However, as I have already indicated, in the 1980s and 2000s, when the two groups attacked each other on a number of occasions, leading members of both the Alavanyo and Nkonya Youth Associations were used as channels for the supply of arms, ammunition, and monies from wealthy individuals and other groups/actors with links to the two communities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya have endeavoured to socially navigate their way out of social and economic challenges that have marginalized their potentialities and rendered their futures opaque due to the ongoing land conflict.

Globally, while youth are often perceived by governments, religious groups, and civil society organizations, among other bodies, as the hope and engine for growth in society, the concrete structures to help the youth to actualize their potential have, in most cases, remained extremely inadequate or non-existent (Di Nunzio 2017). At least, this is the case in many African societies where, because of many conflicts, the youth have been left behind due to the lack of peace and sustainable programmes, coupled with economic deprivation (Honwana 2012). The youth of Alavanyo and Nkonya have refused to be a 'lost' generation by engaging in various tactical actions to reverse their increasing economic hardships and social deprivations in order to live adult and socially responsible lives.

In this sense, this paper has made a unique contribution to the broader literature on how to appreciate the complexities of everyday agency of youth in protracted land conflicts that are embedded in issues with court verdicts or illegal economic activities, including marijuana cultivation. The paper has demonstrated how the actions and reactions of the youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya stem from the lack of

access to fertile land, heightened unemployment, and protracted violence and hostilities. The agencies of youth are also explained by the apparent loss of political clout on the part of family heads, chiefs, and state actors to deal decisively with the conflict situation. In the two communities, while the social structures of the family or marriage are not adrift, the actual possibilities of maintaining family life or marriage have become a daunting challenge for most youth. The aggravated loss of vital human relations between peoples of the two communities, and the declining spirit of communal support (even within the same community), which is a central tenet of the human and social value system of most Ghanaian societies, has frustrated the youth in their everyday efforts to make ends meet.

Presently, the youth of Nkonya and Alavanyo see the land conflict as a destructive 'machine' that is eroding the future and marginalizing their capacity to turn the resources of the land to productive ends. This has engendered a persistent culture of social and personal crisis for the youth, in which they seem perpetually embedded, and determines how they navigate their way through the turbulence of everyday life. However, as Utas (2005) argues, conflict and war zones may be precarious and treacherous, but they may also present possibilities for upward social and economic mobility, even though they may contain unforeseen pitfalls that lead to increased marginalization (2005, 408).

Efforts to address the embedded culture of deprivation and unpredictability in Alavanyo and Nkonya requires the concerted efforts of chiefs, state, nonstate actors, and especially the youth themselves to help resolve the conflict so that mutual respect, freedom, and conviviality may characterize social relations between the two groups. This move would not only bring social progress to the area, but would also pave the way for youth of the two communities to gain access to the fertile land and livelihood opportunities in order to actualize their individual and collective upward social mobility aspirations.

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