

Indigenous institutions, governance and development: Community mobilization and natural resources management in Ghana

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Introduction

In Ghana, the 1992 Constitution enjoined on development programming to ensure that culture informs all development activities. Culture is thus gradually making inroads as an entry point to sustainable development. The original notion of separating the cultural from development and seeing culture only for tourism purposes is becoming a thing of the past. This is largely due to the resilience of culture and its institutions, despite the imposition of western worldview. This realization has given rise to the current development paradigm referred to as endogenous development. Indeed new partnerships are being sought between the 'traditional' and the modern for durable local-level development. It is important then to have in-depth understanding of the following in order to deal with issues of epistemology and ontology of this alternative paradigm:

- How do rural people conduct their development (the process issues)?
- What structures and systems propel development?
- What institutions are involved in ensuring actions and inactions (regulatory), and how do these relate to externally imposed governance structures?

This study draws examples from case studies of the *asafo* in the Mankessim traditional area in the Central Region of Ghana, as well as the potential of indigenous institutions for natural resources management in the Wassa Akutuase Traditional Area in the Western Region. The *asafo*, traditionally, performed military functions and so large settlements could have more than one *asafo*. As in any military establishment, the term company is used to describe the hierarchically organized group with a distinct and defined authority structure. The terms *asafo* group or *asafo* company are found in the literature and mean the same group of organized and structured persons with the sole responsibility of defending the community. The results enhance the understanding of how indigenous institutions can help conduct and propel development.

Recent development thinking recognizes the important role of civil society and civil society organizations as complements to the efforts of governments and the private sector in the development process. While formal CBOs and local NGOs have been actively promoting development activities in many communities, most often, the tendency has been to neglect important indigenous practices. There are many failed

projects resulting from insufficient linkage of the projects to local/indigenous practices; these should warn development practitioners to rethink development practice.

The literature is replete with case studies that extol the benefits to be realized when communities participate in development projects. Clearly, the benefits do not derive from mere participation but from the extent to which people are able to infuse ideas generated from their daily life situations into project design and implementation. This is missing in previous development efforts. The tendency of formal development organizations to by-pass local knowledge systems and practices frustrates development work and is partly at the base of the inability of these organizations to reduce poverty.

Traditional institutions have always existed in Ghanaian society and have sustained society despite several years of external control by governmental institutions. State institutions tend to work outside of the traditional institutions and this tendency is equally applicable among NGOs. The consequence has been the neglect of enriching ideas from local practice.

The Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development (CIKOD) is an Accra-based NGO that is concerned with the question of how to integrate traditional institutions in formal development work. The Centre for Development Studies (CDS) at the University of Cape Coast has been at the forefront of research and documentation of rural development issues in Ghana since its establishment in 1968. Both the CDS and CIKOD recognize that NGOs and development agents have ignored the traditional institutions and authorities in development work principally because the traditional institutions do not always conform to western worldviews and criteria for organizational development. The preference is for externally facilitated organizations such as CBOs, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and cooperative societies. Such organizations generally do not incorporate the indigenous knowledge, practices and criteria of the target rural communities. CIKOD's emphasis on the traditional institutions is underlined by the realization that externally facilitated organizations such as the CBOs and cooperative societies tend to be weak and vulnerable to manipulations by the development agents and politicians. They also tend to have weak leadership and organizational capacities.

The premise of this chapter is that, to attain an effective and inclusive rural civil society that can give voice to the poor, development practitioners need to build on and support the organizational development of traditional institutions. This should lead to coordinated traditional civil society organizations that will operate beyond their limited traditional roles to give voice to the marginalized.

Indigenous institutions

In this chapter, the term indigenous institution refers to the structures and the units of organization in a community and encompasses also the norms, values, beliefs and cosmovision that guide social interaction. Traditional institutions shape the local organization, while the leadership structures within the community and their functional roles ensure compliance with the rules, norms and beliefs on the part of the populace. Traditional institutions referred to in this chapter paper are concerned with the wider changes in society. In the rural community, they are assisting to achieve improvements in socio-economic conditions (Kendie and Guri, 2006).

Organizational development is defined as the facilitation of an organization's capacity to self-reflect, self-regulate and to take control of its own processes of improvement and learning. Communities organize themselves in various groups (clans, *asafó* companies, women's groups and youth groups) to reflect on their development challenges and to find solutions to these problems. These groups adopt various methods of reflection to formulate solutions, mobilize resources and to demand resources and services from state or private institutions. How these community organizations and the state institutions can cooperate to advance the development process and to ensure good governance and the reduction of poverty is the focus of this chapter.

Culture, governance and development

Post-independence countries in Sub-Saharan Africa invariably adopted republican systems of governance with national legal and law enforcement systems and centralized decision-making. The development model adopted was informed by modernization theory and built upon the basic tenets of positivism.⁵⁴ Modernization theory perceives pre-industrial societies as weak and stagnant, 'but there should be no cause for despair because adherence to evolutionary optimism keeps the idea of progress alive. Development proceeds essentially in a straight line, with economic growth as its centre' (Mittelman, 1988).

The results of the United Nations Development Decades and the various programmes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which are derived from the conventional development model in many developing countries, have been terribly disappointing. Realizing the difficulties at reducing poverty via the conventional development model, a paradigm shift towards alternative development has been proposed with an agenda focussing on the following pivotal issues (Gohlert, 1993):

- Empowerment of people at the grassroots, especially of women and the poor;
- Self-reliance;
- Sustainable development;
- Respect for local culture and traditional knowledge and wisdom;
- A sense of community expressed through equal partnership and solidarity.

Korten (1990) defines the parameters of this paradigm:

Alternative development is a process by which the people of a society develop themselves and their institutions in ways that enhance their ability to mobilise and manage available resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in the quality of life consistent with their aspirations.

The development of people and their institutions ought to be contextualized, embedded in the norms, rules and organizational units that ensure orderly living.

⁵⁴ See Toon van Eijk (1999) for a detailed account on the positivist, constructivist and transcendentalist paradigms.

These are the cultural elements of a people built over many generations. Culture then is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes the arts and language, the modes of life, the fundamental rights of people, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Institutions and development

An important component of culture is the institutions that enforce the rules, norms and values. Everywhere in the world, the authority and structure of these institutions are clearly defined and this is also so for the traditional institutions in Ghana. Institutions are very relevant in development work; this is how modern governments are organized and also explains the proliferation of NGOs all championing the mobilization of people to participate in development. Indeed, the literature espouses the essential need to build strong local organizations as the only way to sustain development initiatives. Bergdall (1988) argues that:

For development efforts to be sustained over the long haul, strong indigenous institutions are required... locally grounded organisations are indispensable for durable initiatives to improve the quality of life – wherever in the world those initiatives might be.

The logic is obvious. Unfortunately, however, the building of local institutions has tended towards agency creations oblivious of the traditional institutions in the local space. A dualism in governance has emerged whereby the traditional systems exist parallel to the formal, western-imposed governance system. It is important to note that before colonialism, there existed systems of governance in all African societies varying from the complex in states such as the Asante kingdom and the Dagbon state to the acephalous⁵⁵ societies in parts of northern Ghana. Colonial rule utilized the chiefs in a form of indirect rule in West Africa and, in many cases assisted greatly in corrupting and compromising the role of this institution in local governance (Abayie, 1997). With independence, the nationalist African leaders sought supreme control over their countries. In some cases chiefs were banned altogether (Tanzania and Guinea). In other cases, the chiefs or traditional rulers got coopted in government or were allowed a parallel existence in the margins (Ghana). In spite of these, the chieftaincy institution and all other forms of traditional institutions still exist in African society and help in the maintenance of law and order.

In a review of the developmental potential of externally created institutions – the water user committees often set-up to manage rural drinking water projects – Kendie and Abane (2001) found that in many communities in northern Ghana and the Maritime region of Togo, the committees worked only to the extent that they obtained incentives from the external water supply agency. The authors noted that water committees or such similar committees created to manage rural development projects must be situated in the context of village socio-politics, respecting both the traditional patterns of behaviour and the gender dimensions of resource management (see also Kendie, 1999). In this paper, we put forward the thesis that the non-

⁵⁵ Societies with no centralized political authority surrounding a central figurehead.

recognition of traditional institutions as capable organizations in the management of projects is at the base of the problems with the sustainability of development projects.

'Development is principally about culture' (Arendonk and Arendonk-Marquez, 1988). But all societies have now increasingly to deal with one dominant global culture (of the western world) that is built around rationalism, individualism, secularism and utilitarianism. The virtues of transcendence and communality, which underlined the traditional way of life, are being increasingly eroded by this overarching, powerful global culture. Ajei (2001) has examined Akan humanism and consensual democracy as the pillars of the traditional system of governance. Akan humanism recognizes that: first, all values derive from human interests; and second, human fellowship is the most important of human needs. To the Akan, 'political power rests ultimately in the hands of the populace... though these rights may be given up for the purpose of reaching a consensus' (Ajei, 2001).

We are not implying a wholesale return to tradition and traditional institutions in our development efforts. Nevertheless, there are manifest difficulties in attempting to achieve rural development goals while neglecting the institutions that people have evolved and lived with all these years.

The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana enjoins on development planning to be conscious of culture and its ramifications for successful implementation of projects. Article 39 (1) states that

the state shall take steps to encourage the integration of appropriate customary values into the fabric of national life through formal and informal education, and the conscious introduction of cultural dimensions to relevant aspects of national planning.

The second clause of the same Article further requires that 'the state shall ensure that appropriate customary and cultural values are adapted and developed as an integral part of the growing needs of the society as a whole'.

It is in this context that this study draws attention to the nature, structure and form of traditional institutions, and their relevance for development work. This is against the backdrop of the increasing erosion of the role of traditional institutions by the state and the tensions this is creating between these institutions and the formal governmental structures.

The discussions in this chapter are limited to one type of traditional institution – the *asafo* in southern Ghana and how they can complement the developmental activities of the formal government agencies. Two communities were selected for the study – Mankessim Nkwanta in the Central region and Wassa Akutuase in the Western region. The latter community is located in a forested region and has serious problems regarding illegal logging, affecting both the vegetation and agricultural productivity. While the *asafo* group in the community is organized and has been working to reduce deforestation, the Ghana Forestry Commission set up a community forestry committee without reference to the activities of the *asafo*. The former community demonstrates the benefits to be derived when the traditional and modern institutions cooperate sufficiently in development work.

Approach to the study

The research methodology involved the use of several techniques. Focus group discussions were held with the traditional leadership (chief, elders and queen mother) and the leadership of the *asafo* in the communities. Selected individual members of the *asafo* and ordinary citizens of the communities were also interviewed to ascertain their views and perceptions of the role of the *asafo* in present day development domains. Members of the unit committee⁵⁶ and the assemblyman (the local elected representative in the district assembly) of the area were also interviewed.

The community-focused case study approach employed here was designed to allow for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon. While there are similarities in the operations of the *asafo* across communities in the Akan speaking regions of Ghana, each community is unique in many respects in regard to structure and form as well as the inter-relationships among institutions.

The draft of the findings was returned to the communities for validation. The process allowed for further discussions to clarify issues that may have been misunderstood. The second draft of the report was submitted at a workshop in Kumasi and the discussions further enriched this chapter.

Traditional institutions of governance in Southern Ghana

Traditional institutions comprise all the structures, systems and processes that communities have evolved in the course of their history and development to govern them. These are distinct from national governance authorities, which are creations of the modern state. The traditional institutions in southern Ghana include:

Leadership institutions

Leadership institutions include all those whose leaders form part of the decision-making processes of the community. This is not to say the leaders of the other institutions play no such roles. It is the magnitude that is considered here. The institutions are: chieftaincy (chief – Ohene, Tobge, Namine, Nii), queen mothers (Ohemaa, Mamaa), male and female youth leaders (Nkwakwahene and Sohefia), clan heads and elders.

In southern Ghana, the head of the *oman* (the traditional state) is the *omanhene* or paramount chief. Next after the *omanhene* are the divisional chiefs, *ohene*. The villages, *nkura*, are headed by the *odikro*, literally meaning, the owner of the village. Each *nkura* is inhabited by a number of family groups or clans/lineages. Each family group or clan in the village is headed by an *abusuapanyin*, the elder of the family group. He is to be distinguished from the *ofiepanyin*, the head of a household. The *abusuapanyin* is politically important as the link between his family group (clan) and the rest of the

⁵⁶ Unit Committees are the lowest level structures in the formal government system. They consist of at least 15 members – 70 per cent elected by the community and 30 per cent appointed by the head of state in consultation with identified groups in the district.

village; he is an elder, *panyin*, of the *odikro*, and member of the village council. The clans are scattered segments or sections of the seven or eight Akan clans. Figure 1 shows the traditional authority structure in Southern Ghana. In addition, all chiefs/heads have their female counterparts called *ohemaa*, *hema* and *obaapanyin* corresponding to the *omanhene*, *ohene* and *panyin* respectively.

In the Akan tradition, the chief at all levels (*oman*, divisional, sub-divisional, village) has a council of elders. At the *oman* level, the traditional council comprises the *omanhene* and *ohemma* or queen mother and all the divisional chiefs (*ohene*). At the divisional level it is the *ohene* and his *ohemaa*, as well as the sub-divisional chiefs (*apakanhene*), and all his *abusuapanyin* (heads of the clans). At the village level it is the *odikro* and his *obaapanyin* and *abusuapanyin* together with the opinion leaders in the village. The *abusuapanyin* (heads of the seven clans) form the *besuan* (committee of seven), which advises the chief on development issues.

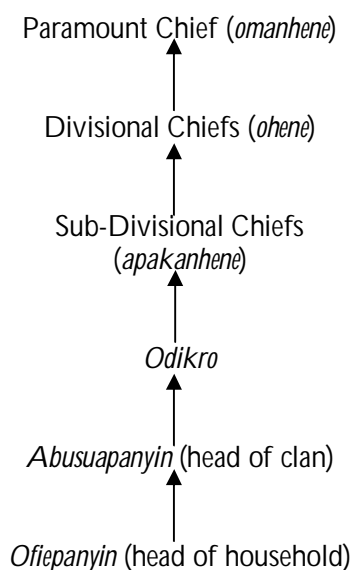


Figure 1 Leadership structure of the akan state

Functional institutions

Functional Community institutions are defined to include indigenous organizations and groups such as *asafo* groups, hunters groups, clan associations, traditional singing groups, youth groups, women groups and *nnoboa* groups. In short, they include all community organizations, which may or may not be established and/or operate along the lines of 'formal' organizations.

Other institutions

There are several other institutions that cannot be so neatly labelled because their functions transcend several segments of daily living and their leaders command considerable respect in the community. These include the spirit medium, traditional priests, herbalists, soothsayers and sorcerers, rain-makers and so on.

The *asafo* group

In this section we focus on the *asafo* as an indigenous institution. The *asafo* group is an indigenous organization that exists in all traditional areas in the Akan speaking regions of Ghana. They are probably more pronounced in the Central Region and among the coastal communities of Ghana. They typically comprise selected young men and women that originally performed a purely military function but are now the main institutions for dealing with emergencies in the community, as well as mobilizing the people for self-help initiatives. They are age-old institutions that have coexisted with the chieftaincy institution.

The *asafo* exist at all levels of the traditional structure – village, sub-divisional, divisional and paramountcy (*oman*) levels. Primarily, each *odikro* (chief) at the village level has one or more *asafo* groups, with membership of the *asafo* being hereditary. (One joins one's father's *asafo* group).

The upgrading of an *odikro* to the position of *ohene* (sub-divisional or divisional chief) by the *omanhene* (paramount chief) depends on the number and strength of his *asafo* groups. During war, each *asafo* group is expected to contribute a number of men to form the paramount level *asafo* group for the defence of the *oman*.

A typical *asafo* group has an *asafohene* as the commander of the group. The *asafohenfo* (plural) are appointed by the *odikro* in consultation with his elders based on demonstrated bravery and social standing. A woman who shows the same qualities may be selected as *asafokyeremaa*. The *asafo kyerewa* (the drummer), the *asafo kyeame* (linguist) and the *asafo bomber* (the disciplinarian) assist the *asafohenfo*. The *asafo bomber* has wide ranging powers to taunt members who do not show bravery and to punish members who break the rules of the *asafo* or who do not respond promptly to the call of the *asafo kyerewa*. All males in the village above the age of 18 years are obliged to be members of the *asafo* group.

Functions of the asafo

Originally, the primary role of the *asafo* was to protect the resources and citizens in the community from foreign invasion. Today, the *asafo* serves as the core contact point as regards information dissemination in the community. It is common for the *asafo* to formulate and sing songs during public occasions that seek to advise the community against social vices. Such songs are also used to praise illustrious sons and daughters of the community and reprimand those who commit social vices.

The *asafo* is the most vital institution in the community in times of emergencies. For example, in cases of citizens getting lost in the forest, or fire outbreak or armed robbery, the *asafo* organizes to solve the problem. It is also the institution that the chief uses to mobilize the community for communal work in the maintenance of environmental health, or the construction of schools and clinics. The *asafo* are noted for their display function, which serves as source of amusement during festivals, durbars, instalment of chiefs and other special occasions.

Busia (1968) and Gyekye (1997) describe the election of a chief in an Akan village and the role of the *asafo* in that exercise. According to the authors, when a chief is nominated and accepted by the councillors, the people, as represented by the *asafo*, must approve this nomination before the person becomes a chief.

The study communities

Mankessim Nkwanta is a small community in the Mankessim traditional area in the Mfantseman District of the Central Region. From the 2000 population census, the population of the community totals 804, with the economically active population being 417 (92 males and 325 females). The population of the community is mainly female due largely to out-migration. Only one *asafo* group exists owing to the size of the community. The major economic activity of the community is farming and both the men and women do this. The basic staples of the area are maize, cassava, plantain, potatoes and local vegetables such as pepper, tomatoes, garden eggs and so on. Other economic activities are trading and artisanal work (tailors, dressmakers, hairdressers, masons, carpenters and mechanics).

The village was founded in the 17th century through the adventures of a hunter called Edufo. In those days people of the Fante tribes used to go to Mankessim (literally 'big town') to trade. On such expeditions, the team consisted of hunters, in addition to the traders/merchants. On one such trip, Edufo (the leader) and his team of hunters wandered off into the hinterlands finally arriving at a place that they found conducive for settlement. Edufo, though founder and landowner of the area, did not become the chief because of his old age. Rather his nephew, Obuadum was made the chief, hence the name Obuadum at Nkwanta. It was later found out that the settlement was also located on a marketing route for the people of the north (Asante) to get to the south for purposes of trade and warfare and vice versa for those of the south (the coastal Fantes). Similarly, the people to the east of the settlement also used the route to trade at Mankessim and beyond. The settlement became a junction town (an entrepot) for traders coming from both the north and the east – hence the name 'Nkwanta', meaning 'junction', and Mankessim Nkwanta because it is the major junction before the largest nearby community – Mankessim.

Since the settlement was a junction town, it required that Edufo and his people be extra vigilant so as to guard and protect their territory from potential competitors who also found the place conducive for settlement. This resulted in the creation of a squad of young men to serve as a warrior group who would protect the land. At the same time too, Edufo welcomed strangers who wanted to settle in the community because he believed that increased population would improve security. Some of the migrants married and established families and joined in the daily activities of the community. Some also joined the warrior squad, which became known as the *asafo* or *Ntsentsɛ*.

The second study community, Akutuase falls under the Wassa Fiasɛ paramountcy in the Western Region of Ghana and the community has an estimated population of 2,500 inhabitants. The people of Wassa Fiasɛ are believed to have migrated from present day Aguafo and Esikado. The seat of the Wassa Fiasɛ traditional council is Benso. Politically, the Wassa Fiasɛ traditional area is part of the Mpohor Wassɛ East District with Daboase as the district capital.

The area falls within the dense rainforest zone. Most parts are currently semi-deciduous forests because of excessive timber extraction and extensive food and cash crop farming over the years. Farmlands are becoming infertile because of logging, burning, shifting cultivation and consequent soil erosion. The enormity of the problem is seen in the agitation by farmers to have access to portions of the forest

reserve in the area for farming purposes. The bamboo plant is an important natural resource and still abounds in the area. All citizens have free access to this resource. Outsiders, however, have to pay before harvesting the bamboo.

Traditional authority

The traditional authority system in each of the two study areas is made up of the chief and elders, and the *asafo* group becomes a part of the overall traditional authority. The structure of authority here is made up of an overall chief, called *omanhene*, who then appoints divisional chiefs out of the community chiefs (*odikro*) in the traditional area. The appointment to divisional chief is based on the prowess and accountability of the community chief (*odikro*) to the *omanhene*.

For the Mankessim traditional area, there are eight divisional chiefs, namely Mankrado, Ankobia-hene, Adontin-hene, Twafo-hene, Gyase-hene, Bankum-hene, Nyinfa-hene and Nkyidom-hene. The Nkwanta chief, by virtue of the location of the community and the military prowess, is under the Nkyidom divisional chief – this literally means the ‘rear force’. This division is the protector of the traditional area. The people occupy the boundaries of the area so as to protect the area against attacks. Any attacker first has to defeat the Nkyidom (rear guard) before they can gain access into the main area.

The Wassa Fiase state (*oman*) consists of five semi-autonomous divisions, namely Adum, Sekyere, Apinto, Pepesa and Bosomtwe. Each division (*omansin*) comprises a number of sub-divisional areas, which are themselves groups of towns and villages (*nkrow* and *nkura*), with a capital town where the *ohene* or divisional chief resides. The divisional and sub-divisional chiefs have the right to deal with internal matters without reference to the *omanhene* (the paramount chief of the *oman*). The villages or *nkura* also consist of wards inhabited by one or two family groups. Akutuase is a sub-divisional area under the Sekyere division.

Structure and functions of the asafo

The *asafo* is part of the traditional authority. A chief, the *odikro*, usually heads the community. The *odikro* has a council of elders called the *beisonfo* (comprising seven elders – the heads of the seven clans). Below this are the *tufuhene* (usually in charge of arms for war) and the *asafo* group.

An *asafo supi* who is literally the commander of the squad heads the *asafo*. In both Akutuase and Nkwanta there is only one *asafo*. Currently there are five sub-groups in the *asafo*. These groups are distinguished according to their respective functions, as follows:

- The first group takes charge of the drums. When this squadron is needed, the chief drummer (the *okyerema*) beats the drums to call them to attention for whatever task needs to be done. When a community member gets lost in the forest, the *okyerema* sounds the drums to indicate that a search party of *asafo* members is on the way to find and bring the lost one home. During festivals, the same group takes charge of the drums.
- The second, third and fourth groups take charge of the gongs, the flags and the *krakradaa* (rattle), respectively. The *kakradaa* is sounded to call together only *asafo* members in order to relay information to them. There is a special gong used by

the chief (*odikro*) to summon the community, usually on Thursdays, to discuss developmental issues. This gong is to be differentiated from the *kakradaa*, which is solely to summon members of the *asafo*.

- A female, *asafo-akyere*, heads the fifth group. She is known to give the males medicinal/magical/spiritual support in times of war and festivals. She is the *asafo* priestess.
- Each *asafo* has a council of elders who work with the *asafohene* and below them are the work force or group members.

The *asafo* usually consists of males of 18 years of age and above. The *asafo* traditionally did not include women, but for purposes of developmental projects, communal work and farming, women are now involved.

Election to the position of group leader, *asafohen/asafookyere*, is hereditary and a group leader is from a distinct clan. It is the family or clan alone that can appoint or remove a leader. Appointment, though hereditary, is also based on one's prowess and capabilities.

Specific functions of the asafo leadership

The *supi* is the supreme commander of the *asafo*. He holds discussions with the chief and passes the information to the *asafohenfo* (plural of *asafohene*), who then summon their group members for work or/and action. The *supi* is accountable to the chief and the council of elders, as well as to the *tufuhene* for any activity that the *asafo* are to carry out in the community. He supervises the *asafohenfo* to ensure that tasks are effectively executed.

The *tufuhene* holds a special position in the *asafo*. He advises the *asafo* and acts as the general overseer. He helps to solve conflicts and keeps charge of the weapons used for combat and during festive occasions. He is accountable both to the chief and the *supi* for his actions.

The *asafohenfo* are the squadron leaders or commanders. Each *asafohene* has a group of people that he leads for various activities. Decisions are made in consultation with the clan elders and they are thus accountable to the clan elders, the *supi*, *tufuhene* and the members within the group.

The *asafoakyere* (the female *asafohene*) holds a similar position to the male *asafohenfo*. She decorates the *asafo* members with magical powder to make them invincible during war. She is the spiritual leader of the *asafo*.

Mechanisms for dispute resolution in the asafo

Each *asafo* group has elderly people (*abusua panyinfo*) who act as the council of elders. When there is an issue, problem or dispute, the elders and the *asafohene* discuss the problem and try to find a lasting solution. If they are not able to do this, the issue is passed on to the *supi* and the *tufuhene* and eventually the chief. However, if the issue involves the conduct of the *asafohene* (leader of the group), an appeal is made to the *abusua-panyin* or head of the clan, who arbitrates. Should it be found necessary, the elderly within the clan demote him and appoint another one (from within the same clan, next in line) and present him to the *supi* for approval and to the chief for confirmation.

Evolution of the functions of the asafo group

Traditionally the *asafo* functioned mainly to protect and preserve the community. They also helped the women to undertake subsistence farming. As farmers, they helped the females to provide food and economic activities for the sustainability of community members. The *asafo* are also warriors and as such they protected and defended the territory against attacks. They also performed the role of rescuers and thus helped to save members who got lost in the forest or were in danger from wild animals and enemy attack. During festive occasions they also entertained the community with their colourful flags, songs, drumming and dances.

The asafo at Mankessim Nkwanta

With social change, the traditional roles of the *asafo* are also changing and they seek to be incorporated into developmental activities, which are similar to the traditional functions of protection and preservation of the community. In Nkwanta, for example, the *asafo* and the community people meet every Thursday. This day is a general day for communal work. For this purpose, the *asafo* in conjunction with the unit committee plays a very important role. The Thursday duties are mainly for developmental purposes such as construction of school buildings, general cleaning of the community to prevent disease and improper sanitary habits, or protection of water bodies in the community. The *asafo* also organizes the people of the community together with the *asafo* members to engage in cooperative farming. This practice helps the community to cultivate larger areas and thus increase farm yield. In its current role, the *asafo* is still in charge of finding lost people, especially those who get lost on hunting expeditions, and bringing them back into the community. Also, the *asafo* indirectly serves as protectors and guards of the territory and help in times of fire outbreaks, even though the police service is present in the community. The inhabitants still have great faith in the ability of the *asafo* group. They again serve as arbitrators in conjunction with the unit committee to solve conflicts and punish offenders. For instance, during Thursday work, if any one defaults he/she has to pay a penalty of two bottles of local gin or its equivalent in monetary terms.

The *asafo* has continued to exist because its structure and activities have been made to become relevant to the day-to-day activities of the community such as keeping it clean, helping in development and protecting the territory. These contributed to the *odikro* being elevated to the status of divisional chief – *nkyidom* by the *omanhene* of the Mankessim traditional area. In addition, the *asafo* plays a vital role in the annual *afahye* (festival). They are thus recognized by the community who feel their impact. The chief also recognizes the *asafo* as his workforce and hence nothing is done in the community without plans being passed through the *asafo*. This explains the continued existence of the *asafo*.

Ghanaian society is undergoing far reaching social change. The unit committee is probably the most significant local institution that has been introduced as a formal organization at the community level. Thus, both the traditional and the formal systems of governance do coexist, competing for allegiance and control. It must be mentioned that there are certain traditional practices, such as allegiance to indigenous institutions and practices, that the formal system of government cannot supersede. The whole area of chieftaincy and the institutions that support it are very much alive.

Since the *asafo* mobilize the people for community work, they find themselves in competition with the unit committees, which are institutions externally mediated by government and designed to promote control. There are instances in other areas in Ghana when the unit committee members and the assemblyman on the one side and the traditional authorities on the other are in an antagonistic relationship and this retards, frustrates or impedes development.

In every community, there is the presence of the formal system of authority – the district assembly system with its assemblyman or woman and unit committee members. Fortunately, in Nkwanta, the unit committee and the *asafo* have a very harmonious relationship. Any project of the government that has to be undertaken will first of all go to the chief, who will then summon his *baisontu* (council of elders) together with the *supi* of the *asafo* group and the *tufohene* before the said project can be carried out. They agree on the modalities and actions that should take place. Since the *asafo*, in reality, is the workforce of the community it is they that in the end see to the execution of the project. The cordial relationship thus makes the two bodies operate very harmoniously in the village. There is therefore absolutely no conflict of interest in the operations of the unit committee and the *asafo*. In Nkwanta, one reason for the harmonious coexistence of the two, formal and traditional systems is because the chief is a progressive individual who is concerned about the development of his community. An example is the acquisition of the legislative instruments on the operations of the district assembly and its sub-structures. These documents are referred to in cases of disputes in the performance of their duties.

The asafo at Akutuase

The *asafo* at Akutuase play the same roles as in Nkwanta. Specifically, the *asafo* group built all the schools in the area through the mobilization of labour and cash contributions from the community. The creation of unit committees has created conflicts as to responsibilities and a source of worry in this community. There is continuing debate in the area as to whether mobilization for development purposes would not have been better served with the recognition of the *asafo* as the de facto representatives of the people. However, given the fact that the unit committee is mandated by the new local government system in Ghana, the *asafo* have learned to live and work with its members – albeit in a lukewarm manner. To worsen matters, the Forestry Commission in an attempt to stop illegal logging in the area first of all established a taskforce for the protection of the forest in Akutuase, which did not involve the traditional leaders and local people. Since the interest of the community was not catered for, they did not cooperate with the task force and in some cases were even reported to be conniving with the illegal loggers. Later the Commission established a community forest committee (CFC) after the dissolution of the taskforce, with some consultation with the chief. The weakness of the CFC lies in the fact that the decisions on the sharing of the benefits are still taken by the Forestry Commission to the exclusion of the chief and local people. The *asafo* and even the unit committee were not consulted.

The CFC is probably the best opportunity for promoting a synergy between the indigenous and formal institutions to protect and promote the forests and other natural resources in the Wassa Akutuase traditional area. The Forestry Commission has realized the value of involving the traditional authorities in forest protection and

this realization is essential in facilitating a strong collaboration between government and traditional authorities and their institutions to initiate and support natural resources management. The problem, however, is that whereas the CFC has been empowered to arrest illegal loggers, it has no power to control the sharing of the benefits that accrue from the sale of the illegal logs. Evidence on the ground shows that the benefits go to the Forestry Commission. This does not give incentive to the members of the CFC to be effective in their work. Second, benefits that come to the community go only to members of the committee, which creates problems for those members of the *asafɔ* whose work have gone thus unrewarded.

There is the opportunity for a reconstruction of the CFC concept as a partnership arrangement involving the *asafɔ* and other indigenous institutions, the district assembly (unit committees) and the Forestry Commission, where responsibilities and benefits are equally shared among the different stakeholders. This opportunity is lost because of the creation of new institutions oblivious of the existing structures. Where these new institutions recognize the importance of the traditional structures and seek actively to work with them as in Nkwanta, harmony occurs and development work proceeds. At Akutuase, though the *asafɔ* is active and could easily have been mobilized to protect the forest, a new institution was created with its own dynamics.

Discussion

The findings from this study bring to the fore two scenarios of the existing duality in governance at local level, where both formal and indigenous institutions are coexisting.

Nkwanta demonstrates a case where the formal state institutions are coexisting positively with their indigenous counterparts. In Nkwanta, the unit committee members and the *asafɔ* cooperate to mobilize the population for community development projects – in the building of public schools, clinics, clearing the village of weeds, keeping a clean environment and dredging the water ponds.

The Akutuase case demonstrates a situation of parallel action and conflict between the community and its indigenous institutions and the CFC, set up as a formal government institution to address natural resource management in the community. Confusion occurs when parallel structures exist in a community to deal with the same or similar issues without any institutional arrangements for collaboration. Whereas the CFC failed to perform because of lack of motivation, the *asafɔ* felt disempowered and frustrated and actually started conniving with the with the illegal forest operators for their personal benefit. The creation of new committees, whether permanent or temporary, with no due recognition of the existing ones, disturbs the system, as the CFC issue in Akutuase demonstrates.

This study was carried out in only two communities. The results show a very clear trend. The traditional institution of the *asafɔ* continues to perform its traditional function of protecting the community. The military organizational structure exists in readiness if needed when conflicts arise between communities. The *asafɔ* are also active in mobilizing to provide labour for community projects. In addition, they remain excellent entertainers in the songs they sing and the dances they perform

during festive occasions. It must be noted that the traditional military role of the *asafo* may no longer be so relevant given the state security presence and the virtual absence of inter-ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, the *asafo* keep a state of constant preparedness in order to defend the community when the need arises. The community watchdog roles persist in the organization, searching for people who get lost in the forest.

Externally formed local institutions such as the unit committees and CFC are increasingly taking the roles that were performed by the *asafo*. Nevertheless, at Mankessim Nkwanta, the *asafo* and the new institutions are coexisting and complementing each other to protect the community and to assist to provide important social services. This may not necessarily be the case in many communities, as demonstrated in Akutuase, and even the cooperation observed between the unit committees and the *asafo* in Nkwanta may be an exception.

As mentioned earlier, the *asafo* institution exists in the Akan speaking areas of Ghana but appears to be most active among the coastal communities. In Ghana today, there is the concern that in many areas unit committees are non-functional and even non-existent in some communities. The usual reason given is that of poor incentives to the members or lack of funds to provide good working environments. Yet, the *asafo* have been working in the same communities with no regard to incentives. As a nation we need to re-examine the traditional systems of governance to establish their relevance for the formal local governance system. For instance, the evidence from both communities confirms that at the rural community level, there exists (see Kendie and Guri, 2006 for a detailed review):

- a system for local governance based on well-established leadership and consultative structures (chiefs, queen mothers, elders, opinion leaders);
- a system for an annual assessment of the needs of the community, planning self-initiatives, mobilizing own resources and reconciling with the present and the past in the festivals;
- an inbuilt system for monitoring and evaluating developments in the village (social, economic, political) and finding corrective action also in the festivals;
- a system for quick mobilization of the community for emergency and security actions and communal work as well as ensuring effective communication within the community and with other communities in the *asafo* groups;
- a system for mobilizing the youth and community at large to check abuses of power by the chief and elders as well as mobilizing resources for development in the youth groups;
- a well-established social support system that is based on trust and reciprocity in the clan system;
- a system for protecting and projecting women's interests in the queen mother.

In establishing local government institutions, policy-makers have to consider the merits of the above structures. In the case of the *asafo*, mobilization of resources for development is their central activity, which also underlines the functions of the unit committees. As we go up the governance ladder such parallel structures are clearly discernible in the traditional councils and the houses of chiefs. Further analysis is needed to find out areas of convergence and synergy. There is clearly a role for the fetish priest in the district environmental management committees.

All these virtues of indigenous institutions notwithstanding, it is important that further studies be conducted on a larger sample of *asafo* companies and groups among the coastal and inland communities to examine the roles they play and how they can be integrated in development work. Other traditional institutions such as the clans, the fetish, the festivals and the chieftaincy institution itself are important conduits for internal mobilization for development.

Implications for development policy

Ghana's development programme is based on the Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), which in turn reflects the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Prominent among the objectives of the GPRS are the reduction of poverty and the empowerment of the vulnerable and excluded within a decentralized, democratic environment (GPRS II, 2005). Within this context, decentralization of political and financial authority to the district level has been an important policy for achieving the goals of the GPRS and therefore the MDGs. However, the report of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM, 2005) has this to say about the performance of Ghana's decentralization process: 'A fiscal and political decentralization process that is weak, demobilized, unresponsive and ineffective, thus hindering participation, accountability and transparency in social service delivery at the lower levels of government'.

Based on the findings of this study, the authors wish to suggest that the poor performance of decentralization could be attributed to the fact that the dualism in governance at the lower levels has not been addressed by policy-makers. Despite the presence and relevance of vibrant indigenous governance institutions at the lower levels that have been recognized in the GPRS II, there are no institutional arrangements to build the unit committees, which are the lowest strata in the decentralization system, to incorporate these time-tested institutions. This study and others have demonstrated the capacity of indigenous institutions to mobilize local people to participate in development processes at the local level. The unit committees have been politicized since 30 per cent are appointed by the ruling party and therefore tend to have more allegiance to the party than the community. In fact, no matter what one thinks about traditional authorities and indigenous institutions in Ghana, they remain the *de facto* representatives of the people due to their legitimacy, proximity and accessibility to their communities (Abayie, 1997; Assimeng, 1997; Kendie and Guri, 2006). Recent work by CIKOD in many parts of Ghana has demonstrated the capacity of traditional authorities and indigenous institutions such as youth associations to make very effective demands on the district assemblies and other government agencies for services.⁵⁷

The critics may question the capacity of traditional institutions like *asafo* and traditional authorities to be able to engage with large-scale political units and the private sector in this era of globalization and modernization. Boafo-Arthur (2003), however, asserts that:

⁵⁷ CIKOD is implementing a DFID sponsored Rights and Voice Initiative (RAVI) that provides capacity strengthening support to local-level institutions for citizen-government engagement.

Many chiefs (from paramount chiefs to *odikros* or village chiefs), have instituted measures to tackle developmental problems confronting their people in particular and the nation at large. Mention in this regard must be made of the roles being played by Assantehene, Otumfo Osei tutu II, Osagefo Amoatia Ofori Panin II, Okyehene (king of the Akyems) of Kyebi, Togbe Afede XIV, Abgobgomefia of Ho-Asogli and many others who operate at micro levels due to the smallness of the areas of their jurisdictions.

These traditional rulers are engaging with the World Bank and other international bodies for funding for development programmes in their traditional areas. These rulers in the implementation of such programmes use various indigenous institutions including the *asafɔ* groups, the council of elders, queen mothers, youth chiefs, who together constitute the traditional authority. In addition there are indigenous mechanisms such as oath-taking⁵⁸ and rules that permit demotion of chiefs. These ensure accountability and transparency (Abayie, 1997; Assimeng, 1997; Benti-Enchil, 1970).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study points to the fact that the *asafɔ* and other forms of indigenous institutions play parallel developmental roles with formal institutions at the community level. The result is a dualism between the indigenous and formal governance systems, which is most pronounced at the district and community levels. The consequences can be conflictual where there are no mechanisms for collaboration or positive where the two are able to work together. For any sustained development that offers maximum opportunities for local people to participate and own it, efforts must be made to give a role to indigenous institutions in the formal development process at the lower levels. Ghana's decentralization policy offers the best opportunity for this. The recommendation, therefore, is that following the damning report of the APRM on Ghana's decentralization process, it is important that in reviewing the decentralization programme in Ghana, due attention should be given to bridging the gap between the formal and indigenous institutions at the lower levels. The indigenous institutions should be allowed to perform those tasks that they are best suited for, while creating space for the formal ones to cater for governmental interests.

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⁵⁸ Assimeng (1997) explains an oath in the traditional sense to connote a solemn declaration, and in chieftaincy this involves basically a declaration by the chief to serve his people, follow custom and tradition and rule with their consent. If this oath is broken, the consequence is removal from his position.

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