

Conflict Resolution: A Case Study of the Nkonya-Alavanyo Conflict in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines the persistent failure of mediation efforts in resolving ethnic conflicts in Ghana, using the protracted Nkonya-Alavanyo land dispute as a case study. Drawing on Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory, this research analyzes why mediation mechanisms have consistently failed to resolve this century-old conflict. Through secondary data analysis and case study methodology, the findings reveal that mediation failures stem from multiple interconnected factors, including political interference, inadequate stakeholder engagement, cultural insensitivity in conflict resolution approaches, a lack of enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient attention to underlying structural inequalities. The study contributes to conflict resolution literature by identifying specific barriers to successful mediation in ethnic conflicts within the Ghanaian context. It offers implications for improving conflict resolution mechanisms in similar post-colonial societies.

Keywords

Ethnic Conflict, Mediation, Conflict Resolution, Ghana, Nkonya-Alavanyo, Protracted Social Conflict

1. Introduction

Ghana, despite its international reputation as a beacon of democracy and peace in West Africa, continues to grapple with numerous internal conflicts rooted in ethnic tensions, chieftaincy disputes, and resource competition (Tsikata & Seini, 2004). The country has experienced over 200 internal conflicts involving customary authority, territorial disputes, and ethnic divisions (Aapengnuo, 2008). Among these, the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict stands out as one of Ghana's most protracted ethnic conflicts, persisting for nearly a century since its documented beginning in 1923. While significant scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the

causes and dynamics of ethnic conflicts in Ghana, research on this topic has been limited, specifically examining why mediation a widely promoted alternative dispute resolution mechanism—consistently fails to resolve these conflicts. This research gap is particularly significant given Ghana’s traditional reliance on negotiation, mediation, and customary arbitration for conflict resolution prior to colonial intervention (Osei-Hwedie & Morena, 2012). This study addresses this gap by investigating the persistent failure of mediation in ethnic conflict resolution, using the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict as a primary case study. The central research question guiding this investigation is: Why does mediation fail in ethnic conflict resolution in Ghana? The study employs Azar’s (1990) Protracted Social Conflict theory as its theoretical framework to analyze the complex dynamics underlying mediation failures. The significance of this research extends beyond the realm of academic inquiry. Ghana’s prominent role as a regional peacekeeper and mediator in West African conflicts through ECOWAS peacekeeping missions and bilateral mediation efforts (Aning & Aubyn, 2013) creates a paradox when contrasted with its struggles to resolve internal ethnic disputes. Understanding why mediation fails domestically can inform both policy interventions and broader theoretical discussions about conflict resolution in post-colonial African states.

2. Theoretical Framework: Protracted Social Conflict Theory

This study employs Edward Azar’s (1990) Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory as its primary analytical framework. PSC theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding conflicts that persist over extended periods, encompassing deep-rooted issues of identity, fundamental human needs, and structural inequalities. According to Azar (1990), protracted social conflicts develop when communities are deprived of satisfying their basic needs based on communal identity. The theory identifies four key variables that contribute to the genesis and perpetuation of PSC: communal content, human needs, governance, and the role of the state, as well as international linkages. These variables interact through what Azar terms “process dynamics,” including communal actions and strategies, state actions and strategies, and built-in conflict mechanisms.

2.1. Genesis Factors

Communal Content: Azar argues that societies with diverse communal groupings are more susceptible to protracted conflicts, particularly when historical patterns of competition or colonial divide-and-rule strategies have created lasting divisions.

Human Needs: The theory emphasizes that individuals and communities have specific needs essential for their survival and dignity, including security, identity, recognition, and access to economic and political institutions. When these needs are unmet or threatened, grievances develop that can manifest as communal conflicts.

Governance and State Role: The state’s capacity and willingness to address

citizen needs while maintaining impartial governance significantly influence conflict dynamics. Parochial or authoritarian states that favor certain groups over others tend to experience more protracted conflicts.

International Linkages: External actors and relationships can either exacerbate or ameliorate conflicts through various forms of support or intervention.

2.2. Process Dynamics and Outcomes

PSC theory explains how initial conditions evolve through process dynamics, resulting in specific outcomes, including deteriorating physical security, institutional deformation, psychological ossification, and increased dependency on external support. These outcomes create self-reinforcing cycles that make conflicts increasingly difficult to resolve through conventional mechanisms. The relevance of PSC theory to the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict is evident in the dispute's duration, the involvement of identity-based communities, competition over basic resources (land), and the documented failure of multiple resolution attempts over nearly a century.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Theoretical Perspectives

The academic discourse on ethnic conflict in Africa has been shaped by two primary theoretical perspectives: primordialism and instrumentalism. Primordial theorists argue that ethnic groups possess inherent bonds that define their identity and create "natural communities" older than modern states (Van de Goor, 1994). This perspective suggests that ethnic differences are deep-rooted and relatively fixed, making conflicts based on such differences particularly intractable.

In contrast, instrumentalist theorists view ethnicity as a constructed tool used by leaders to mobilize populations for specific political or economic objectives (Van de Goor, 1994). From this perspective, ethnic conflicts are primarily political power struggles among elites who manipulate ethnic identities for strategic advantage.

3.2. Ethnic Conflict in Ghana

Ghana's ethnic diversity, comprising over 100 distinct ethnic groups, provides fertile ground for both primordial and instrumental explanations of conflict. Tsikata and Seini (2004) note that interethnic violence in Ghana frequently centers on "ownership of land and other resources and sovereignty problems." This observation aligns with broader patterns across Africa where resource competition intersects with ethnic identities to produce violent conflicts.

The colonial legacy has a significant influence on contemporary ethnic tensions in Ghana. Colonial administrators often disregarded existing ethnic boundaries and traditional authority structures when creating new administrative units, which forced diverse communities into single political entities (Oyeniyi, 2011). This historical context provides crucial background for understanding persistent

ethnic tensions in post-colonial Ghana.

3.3. Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Mediation, as a form of alternative dispute resolution, involves neutral third parties facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties to reach mutually acceptable agreements. In the African context, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms often incorporated mediation-like processes through elder councils, chiefs, and customary courts (Brock-Utne, 2001). However, the effectiveness of mediation in ethnic conflicts remains a contested issue. Some scholars argue that mediation is most effective when conflicts are “ripe” for resolution and when mediators possess sufficient leverage and credibility (Regan & Frank, 2014). Others contend that mediation may be inappropriate for deep-rooted identity conflicts where parties have fundamentally incompatible goals.

3.4. Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on ethnic conflicts and mediation separately, there is a limited research focus on why mediation fails in ethnic conflict contexts, particularly in Ghana. This study addresses this gap by providing a detailed analysis of mediation failures in the Nkonya-Alavanyo case and drawing broader implications for resolving ethnic conflicts in Ghana.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine mediation failures in ethnic conflict resolution. The case study approach allows for in-depth analysis of complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict serves as the primary case, selected for its duration, the multiple mediation attempts undertaken, and the availability of documentation spanning nearly a century.

4.2. Data Sources

The research relies on secondary data sources, including academic articles, government reports, committee findings, newspaper accounts, and archival materials. Key sources include:

- Official reports from mediation committees;
- Government documents and policy statements;
- Academic studies on the conflict;
- Media coverage and journalistic accounts;
- Civil society organization reports.

4.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis applies PSC theory to identify and examine factors contributing to mediation failures. The theoretical framework guides the examination of factors

that contribute to the genesis of conflict, its process dynamics, and outcomes that perpetuate the conflict despite multiple mediation attempts.

4.4. Limitations

The reliance on secondary sources limits access to primary perspectives from conflict parties and mediators. This methodological approach raises inherent bias concerns, as media coverage may sensationalize conflict occurrences for newsworthiness, government reporting may represent state objectives and political positioning, and academic research may be influenced by theoretical predispositions. This study used several tactics to lessen these biases, such as cross-referencing data from several independent sources, giving peer-reviewed academic literature that passes stringent review procedures priority, triangulating data from a variety of source types (government, educational, media, and civil society), and keeping a critical analytical awareness of potential biases throughout the research process. When contradictory reports surface, they are recognized and debated, rather than giving preference to one source over another. Future research incorporating primary data collection through interviews and field observations would strengthen the analysis.

5. Case Study: The Nkonya-Alavanyo Conflict

5.1. Background and Origins

The Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict involves two distinct ethnic communities in Ghana's Volta Region: the Nkonya (an ethnic group of the Guans) and the Alavanyo (an ethnic group of the Ewes). Despite sharing a common boundary and having historically peaceful relations, including intermarriage, these communities have been engaged in a violent land dispute since 1923.

The contested area encompasses approximately 2,616.23 hectares of land, which holds significant agricultural and resource value (Dzathor, 1999). According to Nkonya accounts, they are the original inhabitants of the area, while Alavanyo oral history describes their settlement with Nkonya permission following displacement from their original homeland. This fundamental disagreement over land ownership and boundaries forms the core of the ongoing dispute.

5.2. Conflict Dynamics and Impact

The conflict has resulted in numerous casualties, property destruction, and economic disruption over its nearly century-long duration. Beyond direct impacts on the two communities, the conflict affects over 232,000 people across the broader region (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). The violence has disrupted farming activities, educational services, and economic development in both communities. The conflict exhibits classic characteristics of protracted social conflict, including:

- Identity-based mobilization along ethnic lines;
- Competition over basic resources (land) is essential for survival;

- Multiple failed resolution attempts;
- Cycles of violence and temporary calm;
- Broader regional destabilization effects.

5.3. Mediation Attempts and Failures

5.3.1. Early Government Interventions

Government involvement in conflict resolution began during the colonial period and continued after independence. The Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) government initiated investigations in November 1992, establishing committees to recommend solutions. However, these early efforts failed to address underlying grievances or build sustainable agreements.

5.3.2. District-Level Initiatives

In 1995, the Jiasikan and Hohoe District Chief Executives established the Mireku Committee to investigate the conflict and strengthen harmony between communities. Despite producing reports and recommendations, this committee failed to achieve lasting peace or address the core issues of land ownership and boundary demarcation.

5.3.3. Security-Based Approaches

The state deployed both military and police forces to maintain order and prevent violence. A Mediation Committee established in 1997 involved the Hohoe Divisional Police Command in addressing complaints from both communities. However, security-focused approaches often failed to address the root causes and instead created temporary solutions that broke down during periods of reduced security presence.

5.3.4. Traditional Authority Interventions

The Volta Regional House of Chiefs (VRHC) played a significant role through various interventions, including establishing mediation teams and imposing sanctions. In 2003, the VRHC established a three-person team, led by a paramount chief, to initiate mediation. Despite traditional legitimacy, these efforts failed due to limited enforcement capabilities and continued political interference.

5.3.5. Alternative Dispute Resolution Initiatives

In 2004, the Volta Regional Coordinating Council established a formal mediation committee under the Alternative Dispute Resolution framework. Led by prominent religious leaders, including Rt. Rev. Dr. Livingstone Buama and Rt. Rev. Francis Lodonu, this committee represented the most systematic attempt at mediation. The committee operated through structured processes, including joint consultative mechanisms and procedural approaches to boundary resolution. Initially, both parties demonstrated commitment and support, which improved significantly by 2006. However, the committee ultimately failed to achieve lasting peace due to its inability to win sustained trust and confidence from both parties.

6. Analysis: Why Mediation Fails

6.1. Application of PSC Theory

The persistent failure of mediation in the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict can be understood through PSC theory's analytical framework:

6.1.1. Genesis Factors Contributing to Mediation Failure

Communal Content: The ethnic dimension of the conflict creates deep identity investments that make compromise difficult. Each community views land control as essential to its survival and dignity, making territorial concessions equivalent to an erosion of identity.

Human Needs: Land represents more than an economic resource; it embodies security, identity, recognition, and political autonomy for both communities. Mediation efforts that focus solely on technical boundary demarcation without addressing these underlying needs are likely to fail.

State Role: The Ghanaian state's limited land ownership (approximately 20% of total land area) constrains its ability to provide alternative solutions. Additionally, perceived state partiality toward different communities undermines the credibility of the mediator.

International Linkages: Unlike some protracted conflicts, the Nkonya-Alavanyo dispute lacks significant international dimensions, which limits both external pressure for resolution and access to international mediation resources.

6.1.2. Process Dynamics Undermining Mediation

Community Actions and Strategies: Both communities have developed sophisticated resistance strategies, including legal challenges, political mobilization, and selective compliance with agreements. These strategies reflect learned behaviors from decades of conflict experience.

State Actions and Strategies: Government responses have oscillated between coercive security measures and co-optive mediation initiatives. This inconsistency creates uncertainty, allowing parties to wait for more favorable political circumstances.

Different chiefs within and outside communities had conflicting legitimacy claims, which was the primary reason why traditional authority initiatives failed. During various political administrations, state-led ADR programs, albeit being better organized, suffered from accusations of government partiality against specific ethnic groups. Only the immediate violence was addressed through security-based strategies, which overlooked the fundamental problems and resulted in short-term peace that disintegrated as soon as the military presence waned. Although religion-led mediation initiatives initially gained legitimacy, they struggled to be perceived as impartial, as both communities sought to win over the support of religious leaders.

Built-In Conflict Mechanisms: The conflict has generated institutional and psychological patterns that resist resolution. Hardened attitudes, mistrust, and vested interests in conflict continuation create structural barriers to successful mediation.

6.2. Specific Factors Contributing to Mediation Failure

Based on the case analysis, several specific factors explain mediation failures in the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict:

6.2.1. Political Interference

Political parties and government officials have repeatedly interfered in mediation processes for electoral advantage. The strategic political importance of the conflict area creates incentives for politicians to exploit ethnic divisions rather than promote genuine reconciliation.

6.2.2. Inadequate Stakeholder Engagement

Successful mediation requires meaningful participation from all relevant stakeholders. However, mediation efforts have often excluded key community voices, particularly youth, women, and traditional authorities with competing claims to legitimacy. The marginalization of young people is especially harmful, as they comprise a sizable portion of the population and, when given the opportunity, can be effective peace activists (Lederach, 1997). According to Anderlini (2007), women's participation significantly extends the duration of peace agreements, promotes interethnic social networks through familial and commercial ties, and serves as a general community bridge-builder. Consequently, the effectiveness of mediation is diminished when they are removed. When these critical stakeholder groups remain outside formal mediation processes, agreements lack the broad-based community ownership necessary for implementation and sustainability.

6.2.3. Cultural Insensitivity

Formal mediation processes have frequently ignored traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and cultural protocols important to both communities. The mediation panels were purely secular in their discussions, excluding traditional libation ceremonies and oath-taking processes that are profoundly spiritual and binding for both the Nkonya and Alavanyo communities. Modern formal agreements cannot compare to the spiritual accountability and ancestral power established by such rites in traditional Ghanaian conflict resolution. Although the agreements were legally binding, they lacked the social acceptance and spiritual credibility required for compliance when mediators rejected these deeply ingrained customs as "outdated traditions" or "mere superstition". This cultural disconnect undermines mediator legitimacy and community ownership of agreements.

6.2.4. Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms

Mediated agreements have consistently lacked effective enforcement mechanisms. Without credible consequences for violations, agreements become mere symbolic gestures that parties ignore when convenient.

6.2.5. Failure to Address Root Causes

Most mediation efforts have focused on immediate violence prevention rather than addressing underlying structural inequalities, historical grievances, and basic

needs that fuel the conflict.

6.2.6. Communication Barriers

Inadequate communication between communities, often exacerbated by intimidation and fear, prevents the trust-building necessary for successful mediation.

6.2.7. Resource Constraints

Mediation committees have operated with insufficient funding and logistical support, limiting their capacity to conduct sustained engagement and follow-up activities.

6.2.8. Conflict Entrepreneurs

Individuals and groups who benefit from conflict continuation, including those exploiting natural resources in the disputed area, actively undermine peace processes. Examples from the case include: persons engaged in illegal logging and charcoal production in the disputed forest areas who operate without accountability because there is no apparent governmental authority; local political actors who incite ethnic voting blocs during elections by inflaming tensions and posing as ethnic champions; and some traditional authorities whose status and relevance depend on staying in their roles as ethnic representatives in the ongoing dispute because peace would diminish their political importance and the economic benefits derived from the conflict (Agyei, 2021).

7. Implications and Recommendations

7.1. Theoretical Implications

This study confirms the utility of the PSC theory for understanding mediation failures in ethnic conflicts. The Nkonya-Alavanyo case demonstrates how genesis factors, process dynamics, and outcomes create self-reinforcing cycles that make conflicts increasingly resistant to conventional mediation approaches. Instead of suggesting that mediation is inappropriate for disagreements with strong PSC characteristics, our research indicates that mediation requires considerable modifications and extra strategies in these cases. Successfully resolving long-running social conflicts, in particular, necessitates: 1) integrating programs for structural transformation that address underlying inequalities in access to political representation, state institutions, and resource distribution; 2) incorporating protracted pre-mediation phases that concentrate on trauma healing, confidence-building, and basic needs prior to the start of formal negotiations; and 3) combining mediation with more general peacebuilding initiatives like economic development, social reconciliation, and educational reform. 4) extending timelines beyond traditional mediation frameworks to account for the generational nature of long-running conflicts; and 5) establishing strong post-agreement mechanisms for implementation support, continuous monitoring, and adaptive management as conditions change. It is necessary to rethink mediation in PSC situations as a part of long-term, comprehensive conflict transformation methods rather than as

a stand-alone intervention.

7.2. Policy Recommendations

7.2.1. Comprehensive Approach to Basic Needs

Effective mediation must address the underlying basic needs, including security, identity recognition, and equitable access to resources. This requires moving beyond technical solutions to engage with deeper psychological and structural dimensions of conflict.

7.2.2. Political Will and Commitment

Government leaders must demonstrate sustained commitment to conflict resolution that transcends electoral cycles. This includes establishing independent mediation institutions insulated from political interference.

7.2.3. Cultural Integration

Mediation processes should integrate traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and cultural protocols to enhance legitimacy and community ownership. This requires a careful balance between customary and modern approaches.

7.2.4. Enforcement Mechanisms

Mediated agreements require credible enforcement mechanisms, including legal backing, monitoring systems, and graduated consequences for violations.

7.2.5. Inclusive Participation

All relevant stakeholders must participate meaningfully in mediation processes, including marginalized groups whose voices are often excluded from formal negotiations.

7.2.6. Long-Term Engagement

Successful conflict resolution requires sustained engagement beyond formal agreement signing, including implementation support, monitoring, and adaptive management as circumstances change.

7.3. Future Research

Future research should examine additional cases of mediation failure in ethnic conflicts to test the generalizability of these findings. Primary data collection through interviews with conflict parties, mediators, and community members would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of mediation. Comparative analysis with successful mediation cases would help identify critical success factors.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined why mediation consistently fails in ethnic conflict resolution in Ghana, using the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict as a primary case study. The analysis reveals that mediation failures result from complex interactions between structural factors, process dynamics, and specific implementation challenges.

Key findings indicate that mediation fails when it: 1) addresses symptoms rather than root causes, 2) ignores cultural contexts and traditional mechanisms, 3) lacks adequate stakeholder engagement, 4) operates without effective enforcement mechanisms, 5) faces political interference, and 6) fails to address basic human needs underlying ethnic competition.

The study contributes to conflict resolution literature by providing a detailed analysis of mediation failures in the Ghanaian context and demonstrating the continued relevance of PSC theory for understanding protracted ethnic conflicts. The findings have broader implications for conflict resolution in post-colonial African states facing similar challenges.

While the Nkonya-Alavanyo conflict remains unresolved after nearly a century, this analysis suggests that alternative approaches addressing structural inequalities, basic needs, and cultural dynamics may offer better prospects for sustainable peace. However, such methods require sustained political will, adequate resources, and genuine commitment to addressing historical injustices that continue to fuel ethnic tensions in Ghana and beyond.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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