

# “Becoming a chief is more important than anything else in life.” Interrogating the notions of success and fulfilment among Mamprusi royals in Northern Ghana

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## Introduction

Although they are barred from participating actively in politics and do not hold any formal political positions at the local and national levels beyond the few statutory roles assigned to them in the Constitution and Acts, traditional leaders in Ghana (that is, chiefs, earth priests, queen mothers, etc.) are still prominent in the Ghanaian society and are very active in the social and political life of the country. The Ghanaian print and electronic media is replete with the activities of traditional leaders. Traditional leaders are still a strong pillar around which entire communities are mobilized on a regular basis and play prominent roles in the social, cultural and religious activities of their groups. With the clamouring of sections of the business and educated elite as well as many professionals for high traditional titles, the prestige and status accorded traditional leaders, which have been on the ascendancy in Ghana in the last decades, have been further boosted.

This paper examines the importance of the chieftaincy institution among the Mamprusi of Northern Ghana, their obsession with acquiring traditional titles, and explains why many residents often mobilize their economic, social, political and spiritual capital to compete for traditional chieftaincy titles, sometimes to the detriment of the welfare of their households and relatives. It also examines the unique notion of success and fulfilment in life among Mamprusi royals and non-royals. For most Mamprusi, acquiring a chieftaincy title is the ultimate desire in life. Although living in an increasingly materialistic society, many Mamprusi royals do not understand why individuals and households, particularly the urban, Western-educated residents, would continue to accumulate material and financial possessions beyond what is required for the subsistence of their households, especially when they do not intend to use their wealth and finances to obtain chieftaincy positions and titles.

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## The Mamprusi society

The Mamprusi, with an estimated population of about 350,000 inhabitants, reside mainly in the savanna area of north-eastern Ghana where they were able to establish a traditional kingdom (Mamprugu) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after defeating the autochthone groups (Drucker Brown 1975). The traditional Mamprusi state consists of the province of Nalerigu and five other provinces. The society is highly hierarchical with a centralized political system with several levels of traditional office holders at the provincial, sub-provincial and village levels. The Mamprusi society makes a distinction among the royals (*nabiisi*), the elders (*kpamba*) and the commoners (Schlottner 2000, 54-56). Today, they are still largely rural residents with a few urban towns. Most residents are subsistence farmers, though trading, transport and other services are available in the towns. Public and civil servants are mainly found in the towns (Tonah 2004).

## Competing notions of success and fulfilment

Just as elsewhere in Ghana, Mamprusi society has always had to contend with several competing notions of success, and indeed many residents do acknowledge the importance of these in their lives. First, there is an increasing importance of wealth in their society as a result of the monetization of life and their integration into the national economy. In the past (that is, the pre-independence days), wealthy individuals included persons who had large farms, or rather, large food barns and livestock herds. In recent times, persons with access to agricultural machinery and equipment, vehicles, commercial buildings and stores are considered to be wealthy. Indeed, many of the wealthy farmers among the Mamprusi have moved to the towns and invested in the housing, trading and transport sectors.

Another group of persons who command respect in the Mamprusi society are the educated elite, particularly those who have influence in national political life and are able to link their communities with regional and national political leaders, donors and international development agencies which bring access to funds and material resources of various kinds. These include professionals, politicians, military and police officers, high ranking officers in the public and private sectors. However, most of the educated elite and business men reside in the cities and only visit their extended family members and relatives occasionally.

Despite the increasing importance of education and material wealth in the lives of the Mamprusi, the most sought after life-goal of most Mamprusi residents (royals and non-royal members) is to be made a titled person or a chief, particularly one involving a high traditional office. There is a strong devotion to traditional rule among the population. Royals and non-royals seek chieftaincy titles not just for reasons of prestige but also because of the widespread belief that at a certain stage of their life adults should acquire titles to reflect not only their status within their community but also to become part of the

group of respected elders in the community. Besides, it is generally believed that to command respect, mature adults should not be called by their names but rather by a title, conferred on them by a chief. This explains why royals and commoners would also accept the so-called 'dry chieftaincy titles,' that is, titles without any material benefit whatsoever or even titles of settlements which have been deserted or those without inhabitants. Indeed, some educated persons and business men resident in the cities believe they can raise their level of recognition in the Mamprusi society by acquiring traditional titles. Others who feel they do not receive the level of respect, acknowledgement and recognition abroad do come home and compete for or use their wealth and networks to 'buy' chieftaincy titles.

The result of this craving for traditional titles is that most royals and non-royals would commence the search for a chieftaincy title at a very early age. As they advance in age, most royals seek to move from less known to prestigious titles that they believe reflect their growing influence and status within the society. Royals, therefore, tend to progress from acquiring less-valued titles of small settlements to highly-valued titles at the provincial and divisional levels. The ultimate goal of every royal, of course, is to become the paramount chief or king.

### The competition for chieftaincy titles

The Mamprusi are very proud of their traditional political system and their commitment and loyalty to their chiefs and royals are unequalled. Becoming a chief is the most cherished aspiration of all royals and non-royals. The competition for chieftaincy positions at all levels is, therefore, often fierce and royals would mobilize all human, spiritual and material resources at their disposal towards attaining this goal.

Chiefs at the various levels of the political hierarchy have to regularly organize contests to fill positions that become vacant after the death of the incumbent. This invariably means that there are hundreds of titles at various levels of the political hierarchy to be contested for in each of the five provinces and the central province of Nalerigu, and yearly, dozens of titles are conferred on residents. The large number of chieftaincy positions that are available to royals and non-royals within a province often means that competition for chieftaincy titles is a permanent feature of the political landscape. Candidates for a particular title would, typically, lobby the appointing chief for the title/position. Thus royals at the sub-divisional level would lobby the sub-divisional chief for titles that become vacant while those at the divisional levels lobby the paramount chief for such titles. Similarly, royals contesting for the paramount chiefship position have to lobby the *Nayiri*, the overlord of the Mamprusi, for the position. Invariably, the competition includes having to lobby the chief's wives and children, his elders, diviners, relatives, friends and all persons considered influential in the traditional area. Royals would typically begin their political career by competing for less prestigious titles usually located in the small and rural settlements and then hope to ascend to more prestigious and lucrative titles located

in the towns in a circulating and ascending fashion (cf. Ibrahim 2004; Staniland 1975). Because chieftaincy titles are preferably given to elderly persons who tend to rule for only a few years, competition for chieftaincy titles has remained a permanent feature of the Mamprugu political landscape (cf. Awedoba 2006, 411-17; Tonah 2010).

### Mobilizing resources for the contest

The bulk of the resources used in campaigning for chiefship positions comes from the household's grain, livestock and cash reserves. Contestants also mobilize resources from family members, relatives and friends. Wealthy individuals and households typically accumulate large herds of cattle, sheep, goats and poultry that are then used in financing the cost of contesting for chiefship. Indeed, for most Mamprusi, the essence of accumulating wealth in livestock is to be able to contest for a chiefship position in future (Tonah 2010). This explains why most Mamprusi find it awkward for non-royals (*tarima*) to be accumulating wealth when they cannot compete for a chiefship position or title. The dispensation of one's resources, mainly the livestock herd, is often at the heart of the competition for chiefship positions. Contestants contribute livestock towards the celebration of the late chief's funeral. They also give various gifts to the appointing chief's delegation during the funeral as well as provide their diviners and soothsayers with livestock that are used in performing rituals to protect the contestants from their rivals and enhance their chances of winning the contest. Furthermore, household livestock are often sold and the proceeds used in purchasing grain to feed the contestants' supporters and campaign team members. Several items are also distributed to relatives of the appointing chiefs as gifts and these typically include towels, slippers, cloths and buckets.

### Conclusion

Today, most Mamprusi residents in the traditional area still prefer being successful in their traditional localities than in the modern, urban areas. In contrast to the educated elite and other city residents for whom becoming wealthy is a noble value in itself, many Mamprusi residents only require wealth to the extent that it may facilitate their acquisition of a chieftaincy title or position. Wealth accumulation, per se, is not a cherished goal of the ordinary Mamprusi. The most important achievement in life is to become a titled person or chief. Royals and non-royals abhor being called or referred to by their names. They prefer to be called by a chieftaincy title. They will therefore seek chieftaincy titles of any kind within their society. At the lower level of traditional governance, such titles bring the individual a notion of self-fulfillment and prestige, a sense of having achieved a meaningful life in their society, while higher level titles may, in addition, bring power, wealth and access to labour in the society.

Finally, the paper has sought to show that Mamprusi notions of achievement

and (self-)fulfillment contrast sharply with those of the majority urban, educated residents most of whom define success largely in terms of monetary/financial achievement, level of wealth, occupational status and extent of influence in the formal, neo-liberal economy (Ayelazuno 2014; Obeng-Odoom 2012).

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