

# **MEDIATING THE DAGBON CHIEFTAINCY CONFLICT: THE EMINENT CHIEF APPROACH**

Emmanuel Debrah

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## **Mediating the Dagbon Chieftaincy Conflict: the Eminent Chief Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article assesses the efficacy of a traditional instrument of conflict resolution. In 2003, the government appointed a Committee of Eminent Chiefs (CEC) to mediate the intractable Dagbon Chieftaincy succession disputes, which both the legal and political mechanisms have failed to address. The CEC mediation model involves the deployment of traditional African diplomacy, which rests on the application of customs, norms and traditional ethics by highly revered chiefs to address local conflicts. The use of the CEC to broker peace and reconciliation among the two feuding royal families of Abudu and Andani has led to important breakthroughs including a reconciliatory gesture by the two disputants, the burial of the slain chief, fixing of dates for the funeral of some deceased chiefs and the enskinment of a successor to the assassinated Ya-Na. The paper has argued that in spite of prevailing challenges, the CEC's approach has the prospect of bringing to an end the perceived obdurate Dagbon chieftaincy conflict, especially when the Clean-Sheet Electoral College strategy is adopted for the choice of the Ya-Na's successor.

**Key Words:** Chieftaincy; Conflict; Mediation; eminent chiefs; Dagbon; Ghana



## INTRODUCTION

Chieftaincy is a highly revered institution in Africa. Not even the advent of modern democracy and the strong currents of Western education and Christianity have succeeded in disengaging Africans from this sacred institution. According to Logan (2005), traditional leaders are valued because they provide a sense of continuity and stability in an era of great change. Williams (2004) agrees that they serve as intermediaries to ensure that change occurs in an orderly and familiar way. Keulder's (1998) extensive study concluded that most Africans cherish traditional rulers because they are approachable and more accessible to the people than the politicians. Moreover, decision-making processes in the traditional governance system are transparent, participatory and consensus – these have engendered harmony and unity in the society.

In contemporary multiparty democracy, chiefs are the gateway to the electoral constituencies. The political parties' grassroots campaigns are impossible without the involvement of the chiefs. They provide the bridge between the constituencies and politicians. By virtue of their active involvement in the political parties' voter mobilization, they have grown in importance. Similarly, chieftaincy has not only become prestigious because of the aura of respect chiefs attract from the enlightened society but also lucrative because of the resource attachment to the institution (Nolte 2002). In Ghana, chiefs, control resources within their traditional area including the authority to allocate lands for commercial use and estate development. They also receive royalties from government regarding sales from mineral and timber resources, among others. For these reasons, there is a high desire among both the educated and uneducated men in the society to become a chief. This has engendered excessive competition among royals to ascend to the throne. The craving to become a chief in order to exercise communal power and influence over the allocation of resources has led to undue struggles between groups including even non-royals to lay claim to the stool and skins. In a contest where the referees (kingmakers) are also involved in the game, the probability that fair competition will not be achieved and conflict will occur is high. As a result, chieftaincy has been characterized by vio-