

# Exploring the Motivations for Youth Group Membership and Identity Construction in the Tamale Metropolis, Ghana

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## Abstract

Globally, cities are relevant centres for peace and security studies; however, evidence abounds that many states are incapable of providing adequate social services, including policing the urban space. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), rapid urbanisation is synonymous with a rising youthful population, limited youth employment opportunities and emerging youth groups in the streets. Notwithstanding the role of cities as economic hubs, the rise in the unemployed youthful population and the limited urban space governmentality by states, youth group formation to effect collective effort as a survivalist strategy is not uncommon. While some scholars in SSA have largely focused on the initiation processes, consequences, shapes and forms of youth group formation and associated violence within cities, an overarching exposure on youth group identity construction and motivation for youth group membership despite the inherent risk in emerging secondary cities, is limited. Critical discourse analysis of media reports, relevant literature, data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) was instrumental in giving a historical perspective of youth group identity construction and young peoples' motivation for youth group membership in the Tamale metropolis, Ghana. Drawing on the General Strain Theoretical framework, this study aims to foreground how the intersection of politics, economic, cultural, ecological and social marginalities induces young peoples' desire for youth group membership and defines youth group identity. The study unravels that poverty and economic marginalities, political party-driven interest, religious dogmatism, and ethnic orientation posit strong motivation for youth group membership and defining identity.

**Keywords:** youth group; identity; membership; motivation; Tamale; Ghana

## Introduction

Globally, it is anticipated that about two-thirds of the world's population is likely to live in cities by 2030; most new entry occasioning in the Global South (UNDESA/PD 2014). Concurrently, Brooks et al. (2014) indicate that more than half of sub-Sahara Africa's (SSA's) population is under 25 years old, and the cohort's desire for urban life is unconcealed. Notably, the rising levels of urban insecurity and limited states' capacity to provide urban services in SSA, including security services, are obvious (Joyce 2017; Muggah 2016). Consequently, the concurrent rise in urbanisation and youthful population in urban SSA, amidst limited states' urban governance capacity, contributes to growing unorthodox survivalists' strategies, including violent behaviours by some youth (Agnew 2001; Muggah 2016). While some scholars in SSA have focused on the causes, consequences, shapes and forms of youth violence in cities in sync with homogenised Euro-centric theoretical perspectives (Maringira and Masiya 2018; Oteng-Ababio 2016; Tonah 2012), knowledge on youth group identity construction and motivation for youth group membership within emerging cities is limited.

In Ghana, even though urbanisation is associated with an increase in youth population, youth unemployment and weak urban governance structures, among other ramifications, there are no direct conflicts or catastrophic violence in Ghana (Global Peace Index 2019). However, there are good reasons why Tamale, the northern regional capital, should be taken seriously in academic discourses, especially on growing youth groups membership. Tamale does have its own complex security challenges, including political parties' vigilante violence, youth violence, and inter/intra-ethnic-related conflicts (Bagson and Owusu 2016; Oteng-Ababio 2016; Tonah 2012).

My interest in the current study is to first pay critical attention to the complex dynamics relating to youth group identity construction. Youth group identity entails how youth groups "see themselves," how the groups relate with other groups and how the groups (dis)integrate into the larger community (Cote and Levine 2002). Secondly, the study analyses the inspiration compelling young peoples' willingness to belong to youth groups in the Tamale metropolis. Youth includes individuals of age 15 to 35 years (MYS 2010). Exploring youth group identity construction and motivation for youth group membership is in sync with the position of Oteng-Ababio (2016, 66) that "most youths join the various groups [in Tamale] based on their own rational decision" and that "understanding their underlying motivation is something city authorities must strive to ascertain."

## Youth Group Membership and the Tamale Context

Youth studies pose a "challenging research agenda" because the concept "youth" is differently defined and conceptualised as a unit of analysis (Cruise O'Brien 1996, 67). Youth is differently conceptualised from being a social category to an age category, among other political, social and economic orientations (Asiedu-Acquah 2015). The conceptualisation of youth remains fluid. However, youth is conceptualised, in this

study, with respect to an age cohort of 15 to 35 years, including the position that youth is “largely a matter of cultural relations and practices” (Asiedu-Acquah 2015, 17; MYS 2010).

In Tamale, children grow up into one or more groups of ethnic, political, religious or popular cultural orientations. Youth groups in Tamale, therefore, appear institutionalised because they exist beyond any particular generation, and they have structured leadership positions and defined roles for categorised membership. Younger and older generations’ membership exists concurrently and works in partnership, for example, Talibans, Kandahar, Al-Qaeda boys, Burma camp, Aluta boys, and Azoka boys, among others. Institutionalised youth groups and their tendency to engage in illegal activities are reminiscent of gangs’ way of life (Klein and Maxson 2006). See table 1 for specific cases culled from media reports.

Macro level motivational factors driving the desire for youth group membership are abundantly discussed in scholarly research. For instance, Hagedorn (2005) attributes the rising incidence of urbanisation and gradual withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services as compelling factors for youth group membership. Consequently, weak governance systems, limited state control efforts and declining life-enhancing opportunities for the youth are equally plausible motivations for youth group membership (Harriot and Katz 2014; Muggah 2016). Other scholars attribute youth group membership to challenges associated with climate variability and the consequences thereof (Samaddar et al. 2016; Yaro 2013) making youth vulnerable and susceptible to youth group membership, whose involvement in illegal activities for economic gain and power overt (Cooper and Ward 2012; Oteng-Ababio 2016). However, this study pointedly focuses on the micro to medium level drivers motivating youth group membership and identity construction in the Tamale metropolis.

**Table 1:** Media reports of some youth violence in Tamale (2016–2021)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Youth group</b>	<b>Event/Incident</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Feb 2, 2021	Kandahar boys	Probe Kandahar boys' attacks on Tamale DVLA boss—Agortime Ziope chiefs to Akufo-Addo	<a href="https://www.modernghana.com/news/1058942/probe-kandahar-boys-attack-on-tamale-dvla-boss.html">https://www.modernghana.com/news/1058942/probe-kandahar-boys-attack-on-tamale-dvla-boss.html</a>
Jun 9, 2020	Aluta boys	Tamale Aluta boys fight police with gunshots over sack near chiefs' traditional area	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qD1dZlv9oog">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qD1dZlv9oog</a>
Dec 18, 2020	Kandahar boys	Kandahar boys, others storm NDA over employment	<a href="https://www.adomonline.com/kandahar-boys-others-storm-nda-over-employment/">https://www.adomonline.com/kandahar-boys-others-storm-nda-over-employment/</a>
Feb 28, 2019	Al-Qaeda boys	Ayawaso probe: police, Al-Qaeda boys clash at NDC polls	<a href="https://dailyguidenetwork.com/ayawaso-probe-police-al-qaeda-boys-clash-at-ndc-polls/">https://dailyguidenetwork.com/ayawaso-probe-police-al-qaeda-boys-clash-at-ndc-polls/</a>
Nov 4, 2018	Al-Qaeda boys	NDC Al-Qaeda boys whip regional secretary, smash his vehicle and more rampage	<a href="https://www.alradioonline.com/21923/ndc-al-qaeda-boys-whip-ndc-regional-secretary-smash-vehicle-rampage/index.html">https://www.alradioonline.com/21923/ndc-al-qaeda-boys-whip-ndc-regional-secretary-smash-vehicle-rampage/index.html</a>
Aug 22, 2016	Azorka boys	Azorka boys clash with opposition demonstrators	<a href="https://www.modernghana.com/news/713788/tamale-azorka-boys-clash-with-opposition-demonstr.html">https://www.modernghana.com/news/713788/tamale-azorka-boys-clash-with-opposition-demonstr.html</a>

**Source:** Culled from media reports 2021

The relative political stability in Ghana has supported some local economic improvement, though geographically varied. Tamale, the northern regional capital, has experienced minimal progress in poverty reduction since the 1990s compared to other parts of Ghana (Cooke, Hague, and McKay 2016). The region “has a relatively high

poverty rate and a relatively large population size [which] means that the northern region holds the highest number of poor people in Ghana” (Cooke et al. 2016, 11). With regard to the northern region, noted for its extensive poverty, polarised political environment, religious fragmentation, and growing friction among popular youth cultural activists, Tonah (2012) pointed out some evidence of protracted chieftaincy disputes since the pre-colonial era.

Triangulation of sociological-anthropological theoretical orientations, such as the General Strain Theory (GST) and the Youth Bulge Theory (YBT), appears instructive in the quest to understand the micro to medium level drivers of youth group membership and identity construction in the Tamale metropolis.

### **General Strain Theory (GST)**

Sociologists focus on strain theories to explain that the tendencies of deviant and criminal behaviours span five decades (Aseltine, Gore, and Gordon 2000); however, the seminal article by Agnew (2001) revealed a more critical analysis of the tenets of the theory. Agnew (2001) unpacked Merton’s (1938) conceptualised strain, characterised by structural conditions (cultural and social structures), to micro level conditions in which an individual’s positive desired value is denied, threatened or the prevalence of an opportunity to engage in a negative event becomes a livelihood option. In this view, conflictual social relationships correlate strain and a build-up of internal pressure manifesting deviant behaviour.

Conversely, deviants’ response to strain experiences could be drug/substance abuse and alcohol consumption, not necessarily hostility. Put differently, an individual’s response to strain (by deviant means or not) depends on the adaptive mode or the individual’s ability to pursue culturally acceptable goals—even in a structurally deficient environment. It is in this domain that the effects of the GST (Agnew 2001) give meaning to the elements of belongingness and conformity or loyalty to a youth group and their modus operandi. Hence, when culturally acclaimed goals supersede institutionally developed governing structures, the tendency to go deviant or criminal is higher (Agnew 2001; Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2015). Notably, the subjective and social contexts in which strain occurs, together with the fluidity of masculinities, are influential on deviant and/or non-deviant behaviours (Agnew 2001; Connell 2013).

Nevertheless, the core tenet of strain theory “that negative emotion mediates the association between diverse measures of strain and a variety of deviant behaviours ... remains in need of further examination” (Aseltine et al. 2000, 259). Following the broad conceptualisation of strain (Agnew 2001), this study examines how culturally, politically, economically, and socially-related strains (that potentially accentuate young people’s motivation to belong to a youth group and their defining identity) manifest in the Tamale metropolis of Ghana, inter alia with the youth bulge in urban Ghana.

## Youth Bulge Theory

The Youth Bulge Theory (YBT) explains that large proportions of youth in a country correlate with conflict and general insecurity. Youth bulge ensues when there is a large proportion of the youth population relative to the adult population (Urdal 2004; Goldstone 1999). Even though the YBT largely interrogates the link between a large youth population and conflict (LaGraffe 2012; Huntington 1998), it has the potential to strain social institutions (Urdal 2004) and promote generational consciousness (Goldstone 1999). The current study focuses on how the youth bulge predisposes the youth's willingness to belong to a youth group, and the study continues to present an analysis of youth group identity in the Tamale metropolis.

## Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory, qualitative research approach to benefit from the “flexibility, pragmatism, and the particular, biographically specific interest of the investigator” (Maanen, Manning, and Miller 2001, v). Data were obtained from media reports (such as *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*, among other newspapers of nationwide coverage), interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD). Even though issues of underreporting and editorial policy influence are associated with media reporting (Holtmann 2001), the relevance of media reports, especially on issues of pain and retaliatory tendencies, are prioritised (Oteng-Ababio 2016). The key informants included leaders of established youth groups (such as the Kandahar, Azorka boys, the Taliban, 64 Bench, and al-Qaeda boys, among others) in Tamale, assembly persons (local government representatives), and religious/traditional/community leaders (table 2). The key informants were crucial because of their relevant institutional memories and knowledge of the oral history of youth activism in the Tamale metropolis. Even though the credibility of oral history is in question, “oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries and other historical materials” (Baylor University 2012).

**Table 2:** Interviewees, sampling strategy and sample size

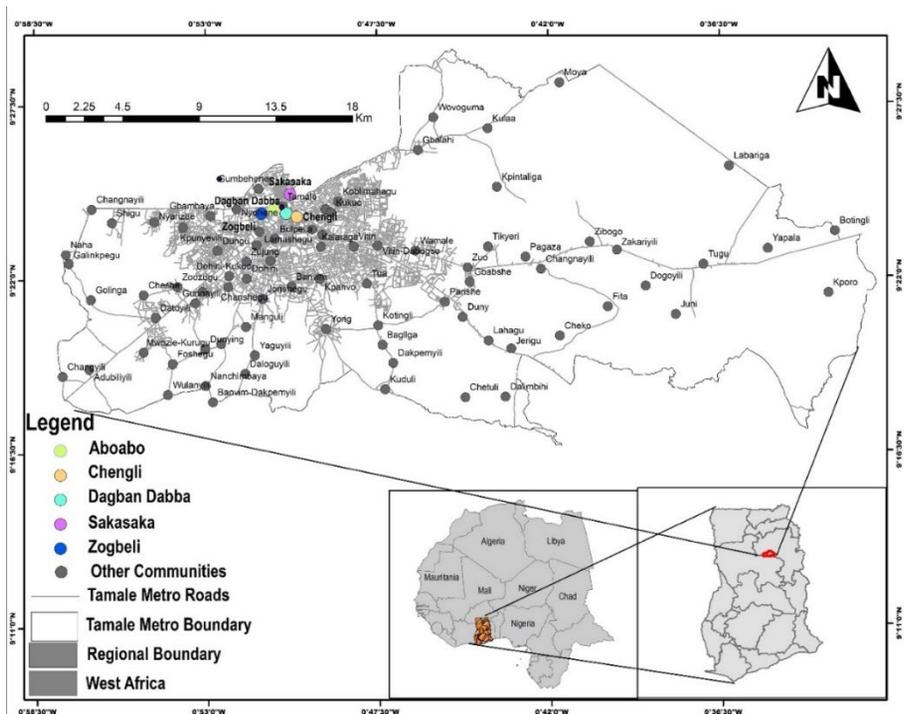
Interviewee status	Sampling strategy	Total
Religious/traditional/community leaders	Purposive	15
Members, community	Convenient	25
Members, youth groups	Snowball	20
Leaders, youth groups	Snowball	6
Assembly persons	Purposive	2
<b>Grant total</b>		<b>68</b>

**Source:** Field data 2022.

Communities with prevalent youth groups in the streets were purposively selected. These included: Aboabo, Zogbeli, Chengli, Sakasaka and Dagban Dabba Fong (figure

1). Subsequently, seven FGDs were conducted among members of established youth groups in the city as a “medium for self-expression” (Obaje and Okeke-Uzodike 2013, 7). Using unstructured interview and discussion guides, the widely spoken languages: Dagbani or English or a combination of both (depending on the participant’s preference) were used in the 45 to 60 minutes interviews.

Consent was sought and all interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken for accuracy. After translating/transcribing the data, debriefing meetings were organised with participants to cross-check and validate the data. This ensured that the transcripts stayed close to the lived experiences of the participants. After various codes and themes had been generated, critical discourse analysis was deployed to make sense of the narratives and lived experiences of participants, cognisance of the text and context (Foucault 1970; Jansen 2008). Critical discourse analysis, within the ambit of intersectional narratives (Christensen and Jensen 2012; Misra, Curington, and Green 2021) appeared very relevant in attempts to unstitch the historical perspectives of motivations for belonging to a youth group and youth groups’ identity constructions in a rapidly urbanising society. Furthermore, useful insights were derived from the potential of critical discourse analysis to go beyond the interpretation of social realities in existence to unravel the ways in which social realities are produced (Phillips and Hardy 2002).



**Figure 1:** Map of Tamale metropolis

**Source:** Author’s construct, 2021

## Results and Discussions

Drawing on multiple archives, field interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), the study explored young peoples' willingness to belong to a youth group and their identity construction in the Tamale metropolis. Youth groups are a critical generational identity, and their identity building cannot be completely dissociated from the political and socio-economic dynamics of the global and local environments. There are generally fluid historical and structural conditions contributing to the willingness of young people to be part of a youth group and the defining youth group identity within time and space. This study presents a historical account of the national and local levels regarding political, economic and the compelling lived experiences of young peoples' willingness to belong to a youth group and the unfolding identity constructions. These perspectives are landmarked within the pre-colonial era (the period before 1900), the colonial period (from 1901 to 1956), and the postcolonial era (1957 to 2021) of Ghana. The postcolonial period is sectioned into the pre-Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) Period (1957 to 1979), the SAP period (1980 to 1990) and the post SAP period (1991 to 2021). This is done in order to unravel associated elements of social transformation within time and space that engender youth group defining identity and young people's willingness to belong to youth groups in the Tamale metropolis.

### **Youth Groups' Membership and Identity Construction in Pre-colonial Tamale (prior to 1901)**

This epoch is captured here to reflect the period before the British formally created and occupied the northern territory of Ghana in 1901 and made Tamale the capital town of the territory (Asiedu-Acquah 2015). Prior to the British occupation of northern Ghana, Tamale was an active transit point supporting the trans-Saharan trade between Sahelian countries and the then Gold Coast, now Ghana (Staniland 1975). Formidable youth groups within the local economy of pre-colonial Tamale were a manifestation of the gerontocratic and patriarchal leaderships that existed in line with the indigenous professions of the people in Tamale. Reflecting on the oral history of the city in pre-colonial time, a key informant, in his late 70s, indicated that youth groups existed in pre-colonial Tamale as symbols of the local trades/livelihood options. Hence, youth groups of the following indigenous professions existed in Tamale: butchers, drummers, dancers, farmers, herders, traders and hunters. Members of these youth groups were each defined and identified by their professional regalia. For instance, in a prestigious Takai dance of the dominant ethnic group in Tamale (the Dagombas), dancers wore well-designed smocks (locally called *fugu*), knee high boots, and a small metal rod held by each dancer (to add sound to the efforts of the drummers) or swerving of a beautiful handheld tail of, mostly, a horse or a cow. In an FGD (members of youth group, Dagban Dabba, 27/09/2021), it was collectively agreed that oral history acknowledges that young people who were members of the dance group were not difficult to be identified in public because of their unique way of dressing, especially during festive occasions.

According to a key informant (78-year-old male, religious leader, Sakasaka, 09/08/2021), youth in pre-colonial Tamale belonged to youth groups of their parents' professional learning. For instance, youth who were members of the young butchers' group had parents who were butchers themselves. In other words, the willingness to belong to a youth group was driven by the will to satisfy the interest of the gerontocratic leadership in which the elderly was considered the wisest and, therefore, took very important decisions for the youth, who were considered less knowledgeable and less resourced. Hence, youth groups' identities were in line with the existing indigenous professional practices and associated regalia. In the views of a key informant:

Butchers at the time were identifiable, in public, by the possession or carrying of shot knives at the hip as well as the skilful display in the use of knife in a fight or in the sales of meat. (Personal interview with 75-year-old male, community leader, Chengli, 04/08/2021)

Subsequently, in an FGD (members of a youth group, Aboabo, 27/09/2021), discussants recalled stories of existing youth warrior groups in the pre-colonial era similar to the Asafo groups in the southern and the coastal parts of Ghana, which were "the traditional militia of pre-colonial Ghanaian politics ..." (Asiedu-Acquah 2015, 2). As concluded in the FGD in Aboabo, the motivation for membership of such youth groups was in defence of the territorial boundaries of their communities at their own will or by the convenience of the elders of the communities. The motivation to belong to the community defence force was a show of strength, commitment to fight for the community, and an expression of discipline to the interest of the elders, as indicated by the discussants among members of the youth group in Aboabo. Youth in this context is viewed as "a space of subordination and discipline" and "largely a matter of cultural relations and practices" (Asiedu-Acquah 2015, 17). The warrior groups were identified by the songs they sang, their style of dancing and drumming and the associated tone of appellations of war. They were dressed in waist level smocks that were decorated with talismans and perceived to possess spiritual powers capable of protecting the one who wore them, as described by a key informant (56-year-old male, traditional leader, Zogbeli, 07/08/2021).

At the community or neighbourhood levels, some youth groups existed as constituents of youth popular culture, notwithstanding the defined indigenous profession-based youth groupings. These groups of youth got involved in music and dance at the community level, especially when there was moonlight. A key informant (56-year-old male, traditional leader, Zogbeli, 07/08/2021) hinted that it was for purposes of socialisation and the implicit development of leadership skills, as well as the reinforcement of desired culturally cherished morals and values that such groups existed and were supported by the elders.

In performing their roles as youth, be it defending their neighbourhood, engaging in popular culture or preserving the indigenous professions in pre-colonial Tamale, and by extension, defining their identity, members of youth groups jostled between meeting

their self-interest and satisfying the expectation of the elders who superintended all youth activities. Youth political activism in pre-colonial Tamale was minimal, partly because of a well-crafted gerontocratic and patriarchal leadership. The domineering authority of the elders became a common strain on all youth, for which acceptance by the elders was guaranteed. Hence, the common cause of action by youth groups in pre-colonial Tamale was the result of the strain of control determined by the elders, similarly portrayed by Agnew (2001). Pointedly, social subordination of the youth by the elders ensured a well-kept generational identity within the youth life course in pre-colonial Tamale, but cultivated strain in the tendency to reify youth economic resourcefulness, power and social influence.

### **Youth Groups' Membership and Identity Construction in Colonial Tamale (1901 to 1956)**

The colonists' strong support for the trans-Atlantic trade route as a strategic point of exit to Europe and the Americas, gradually truncated the trans-Sahara route, and that appeared to have reshaped the role of the youth in the social transformation process associated with the British takeover of northern Ghana. The dominant role of the youth, within the new economic function of Tamale under the British rule, was for the youth to serve as a source of labour as indicated in a reflection over oral history during an FGD (members of youth group, Chengli, 25/09/2021). To enable the role of the north as a labour reserve, pre-colonial youth groups were purposefully stifled through carefully watched over youth activities by the colonists and supported by some chiefs. The strategy of subduing the youth caused “the generation-inflected anti-chief and anti-colonial politics of Ghana” (Asiedu-Acquah 2015, 83)—Tamale was not left out. Consequently, members of dismantled pre-colonial youth groups served as dependable sources of labour for the extraction of minerals such as gold and the cultivation of cash crops such as cocoa in southern Ghana, as narrated by a key informant (65-year-old female, traditional leader, Sakasaka, 09/09/2021). The dominant use of the youth as an economic resource to the colonists subdued activities and the common interest of pre-colonial youth groups.

Nevertheless, new youth groups emerged in Tamale, which were less committed to the ideals of the pre-colonial youth groups, but more focused on galvanising an anti-colonial and nationalist attitude among the youth, as indicated by a key informant (56-year-old male, traditional leader, Zogbeli, 07/08/2021). However, youth political activism in the northern territory was not as active as youth activism within coastal and southern Ghana (Bob-Milliar 2014). The minimal activism that pushed forward the desire to belong to a youth group in the colonial period was largely driven by anti-colonial motives, the desire for nation building and self-governance, particularly in the interest of giving access to formal education to the youth in northern Ghana, as was the case in the southern part of Ghana (Ladouceur 1979). This was manifested in student politics nationwide, young military revolt, and young traders' disillusion, as stated in a speech by Azikiwe, the then editor of the *African Morning Post*, titled “The Revolt of African Youth” (Jones-Quartey 1965, 4). According to Asiedu-Acquah (2015, 20), these

developments among youth groups “appear to have only offered new ways of organising able-bodied youth for wartime and peacetime.” Hence, a noticeable change from disciplined and well-maintained youth groups in the pre-colonial period to generally revolutionary youth groups in the colonial period manifested in resistance identity. Resistance identity evolved from strains associated with colonial rule. Outstandingly, youth group loyalty to a common course of self-governance was eminent similar to the conceptualised strain as posited in the GST (Agnew 2001; Aseltine et al. 2000; Jewkes et al. 2015). Put differently, when the youth are uncertain about a better future, resistance identity construction is the most likely outcome. According to Castells (1997), resistance identities are characterised by opposing forces or strategies that youth adopt to counteract unsuitable circumstances and uncertainties in the future.

Similarly, Asiedu-Acquah (2015, 77) intimated that some colonists, in connection with some chiefs and local officials of the colonists, found youth popular culture—a pre-colonial youth group identity—in the form of drumming and dancing as “‘immoral,’ ‘indecent’ or ‘objectionable’ largely because it questioned political, generational and gender norms rather than moral norms.” The desire by the youth to question the powers of the elders and the colonists was uncommon in the colonial period, creating young peoples’ motivation to belong to a youth group to enable them to fight for national independence.

Admittedly, some pre-colonial youth groups weakly existed in colonial Tamale; however, spontaneous youth groups were periodically formed to stimulate and sustain interest in the fight for freedom and a collective sense of nation building. Mention can be made of the “veranda boys,” an offshoot of the Convention People Party, their role in the fight for independence in Ghana and their continuous fight for better economic conditions for the marginalised (Bob-Milliar 2014). Summarily, influences engendering the interest of the colonists were undoubtedly resisted by varied indigenous groupings, including the youth groups (Hagedorn 2005) and all those who emerged as supportive of Ghana’s independence on 6 March 1957.

### **Youth Groups’ Membership and Identity Construction in Postcolonial Tamale (1957 to 1979)**

The immediate period following Ghana’s independence is considered here as the pre-Structural Adjustment Programme period (1957 to 1979). Dominant youth groups, at the time, had clear political affiliations that reflected their support in the fight for independence. For instance, Bob-Milliar (2014) demonstrated the formation of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) and the Convention People Party (CPP) in 1947 and 1949 respectively as very important in the political history of Ghana. Their youth political activism remained relevant after independence.

Put differently, young people’s motivation to belong to a youth group was more in pursuit of a common national interest for independence. The wide-spread occurrence of songs of appellations, music and dance from Accra to other cities (including Tamale)

was instrumental in galvanising youth into groups for the common goal of Ghana's independence, as indicated by a key informant (59-year-old male, community leader, Aboabo, 13/08/2021). The key informant further indicated that new non-ethnic and geographically based youth groups soon became disappointed after Ghana's independence because of growing authoritarian rule intermingling with some sort of democratic governance, which stifled youth activism in Ghana. One key informant (68-year-old female, community leader, Dagban Dabba, 15/08/2021) reported a situation in which youth leaders were identified and punished severely. Hence, minimal youth group formation and sustenance were observed in this epoch, as indicated by Austin (1964). The few youth groups at the time emerged from the literate and elite youth who were at the forefront of national development. The hard-core military rule of the time brought many youth groups to almost non-existence.

### **Youth Groups' Membership and Identity Construction in the Structural Adjustment Programme Period (1980 to 1990)**

The significance of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) period in this discourse relates to its perceived interventionist ability intended to rescue the crippling national economy of Ghana, and many other SSA countries, following the problems of economic mismanagement from 1957 to the 1980s (Brydon and Legge 1996; Rimmer 1992). Ghana's economic depression in the 1980s inspired the government's desire to opt for the World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP), spanning from 1983 to 1998 (Konadu-Agyemang 2000). Characterised by the removal of subsidies from dominant social services such as education, agriculture and health, the SAP appeared to have worsened the economic conditions of Ghanaians by making market forces determinants of the local economic activities (Roe, Schneider, and Pyatt 1992). The SAP period is associated with the proliferation of youth groups in Tamale, as narrated by a key informant:

Since Ghana opted for the SAP in the 1980s, the conditions for the implementation of the programme, such as cuts on public sector expenditure, opportunities for public sector employment were very minimal. In addition, farming as a dominant profession in Tamale and its environs lost the hitherto subsidies on agriculture, coupled with rapid urbanization in the city [which] seems to have aggravated [the] youth unemployment situation and then many youths resorted to forming groups for social support. (Personal interview with a 76-year-old male, community leader, Chengli, 09/08/2021)

According to Konadu-Agyemang (2000), the introduction of user fees in Ghana's Education Service limited access to education, especially among the poor. Relatedly, discussants (members of youth group, Zogbeli, 27/09/2021) concluded that limited access to formal education was a disincentive to knowledge in numeracy and literacy and, therefore, led to a shortfall of skilled labour in Tamale. Admittedly, the bad economic conditions prior to and during the SAP period appeared to be instrumental in youth group membership. The willingness to belong to a youth group at this time was

principally based on economic reasons, most especially since the SAP/ERP in the mid-1980s resulted in the retrenchment of some public sector workers (Oteng-Ababio et al. 2016). This increased the economic burden of bread winners in some families and worsened the economic situation of most youth who were largely dependents, as indicated by a key informant (64-year-old male, community leader, Aboabo, 07/08/2021). In other words, Hagedorn (2005) posits that the partial withdrawal of the state in the provision of key social services implied a loss of social control in the environs. Consequently, youth groups re-emerged for purposes of solace among peer groups and created survivalist social networks.

Even though the neoliberal economic policies of the SAP/ERP continued into the 1990s (Aryeetey and Baah-Boateng 2007), some incidences and sustenance of civil society activism, media pluralism and the general public outcry over the hard military rule (Gyimah-Boadi 2010) contributed to some liberations and consequently the democratisation of the country in 1991.

### **Youth Groups' Membership and Identity Construction in the Post-structural Adjustment Programme period (1991 to date)**

In the post-SAP period (1991 to date), a multi-party democracy of the Fourth Republic of Ghana commenced in the 1990s. The period was initially characterised by political parties' interest in organising youth wings of their parties at the community level. This was to enable the dissemination of parties' philosophy and to subsequently increase the chances of winning the general election, which was conducted in December 1991. Acknowledging the re-emergence of youth wings of political parties during post-SAP, a key informant (68-year-old male, religious leader, Dagban Dabba, 15/08/2021) pointed to the new development of youth groups that were initiatives of some political party elites, particularly of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Identified by the respective party colours, party paraphernalia such as pictures of leading members of political parties and party symbols, youth political activism was well-known in the post-SAP era. These youth groups acquired territories with the support of sometimes undisclosed financiers, as was concluded in an FGD (members of youth group, Dagban Dabba, 27/09/2021). The discussants further indicated that the territories were commonly referred to as camps, and the groups were identified by names. To this day, some names of youth groups with a strong leaning toward the ruling NPP include Talibans, Kandahar, Patriotic, Capitalist, Zola boys, Al-Qaeda boys, Burma camp, among others. On the other hand, the largest opposition party, the NDC, is associated with youth groups such as the Gbana Vulbe youth, 64 Bench, Aluta boys, Tabakagani, Azoka boys, among others. The names of some of the youth groups are intended to threaten rival groups and demonstrate a willingness to become involved in violence.

Consequently, in an FGD, members unanimously agreed that:

Failure of many political parties to satisfy the youth needs for skill training and jobs after the 1991 election contributed to breakout of youth groups from parties' youth wing with the intentions of making economic gains. (FGD among a youth group in Aboabo, Tamale, 01/09/2021)

Similarly, Oteng-Ababio (2016) observes the proliferation of youth networks in the neighbourhoods of Tamale and states that these groups are characterised by jobless or underemployed members. Tonah (2012) describes the youth groups in Tamale as the "hub of community life," which enhances companionship and cooperation. Oteng-Ababio et al. (2016) consider such youth groups as a proxy for a divisive community, motivated by differing political parties' interests and some territorial monopoly. Hence, the strain of limited attention from political elites and party leadership to youth wings has contributed to a breakout of youth groups. According to one youth group leader (32-year-old male, youth leader, Dagban Dabba, 03/08/2021), the breakout from the main party youth wing was to attract attention from the party and also meet the economic needs of their members by providing services—including violent acts—to people who need them.

Narratives of lived experiences by a key informant (68-year-old male, religious leader, Dagban Dabba, 15/08/2021) also revealed emerging religious-based youth groups in the early 1990s. The motive of young people's desire to belong to religious-based groups was driven by the interest to defend the doctrine and practices of their religion. The dominant religious-based youth groups in Tamale are the Al Sunnah youth group and the Tijaniya youth group. Even though these two religious bodies have similar belief systems, they largely differ in their theological understanding and interpretations of the Holy Quran.

In addition, even though national politics has deeply intermingled chieftaincy issues in the Dagbon traditional area, the horrifying conflicts between the two sides for the chieftaincy title in March 2002 left them deeply divided, according to a key informant (51-year-old male, community leader, Aboabo, 10/08/2021). This division is more obvious among the youth of the two sides—the Abudu side and the Andani side. The differences between the two sides brought to the fore another fraction of youth groups, based on ethnic orientation in the city of Tamale. An interview with a key informant (68-year-old male, community leader, Sakasaka, 15/08/2021) revealed that the major motivation for young people belonging to the chieftaincy-based groups was the desire to defend the orientation of one of the two identifiable sides interested in the chieftaincy. Members of each youth group are commonly identified by songs of appellation sung in public to give respect and recognition to its members. In the post-SAP period, young people's motivation to belong to youth groups was driven by political party orientation, chieftaincy interest and religious beliefs. Youth groups of these orientations could be identified by their names, appellations, symbols and designated colours.

## Conclusions

The paper examined young people's motivation for youth group membership and endeavoured to understand the defining identities of such groups. It is eminent that political, social, cultural and economic dynamics play a significant role in shaping young people's motivation for youth group membership and their identity construction. Multiple marginalities, intermingling with the political and economic processes of Tamale from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, appear instrumental in changing the life courses of most youths and their willingness to belong to a youth group. Specifically, the motivation for youth group membership is largely a result of some sort of economic and political marginalisation, engendering cultural resistance. Consequently, the extent of cultural resistance contributes significantly to the models of identity construction.

Youth groups in the city of Tamale appear to have been institutionalised with dominant identifiers from the pre-colonial to the present day, albeit varied motivations occurred over time. As a socially subdued category in the pre-colonial era, youth in Tamale forcefully belonged to indigenous professional youth groups to satisfy the gerontocratic and patriarchal leadership and subsequently to acquire some skills in order to make a living. Similarly, from the motive of galvanising an anti-colonial nationalistic spirit in the colonial period (1901–1956) to youth activism against the domineering authoritarianism associated with both military and civilian rule in the post-colonial period (1957–1979), youth groups have existed, but with difficulties. In addition, even though 1980 to 1990 marked another period of military rule and stifled youth group activities, requirements in connecting to the Structural Adjustment Programme within the period liberated the proliferation of youth groups in support of the revolution—despite the disappointment in the later part of the regime. Thus, poverty and economic marginalities, political party-driven interest, religious dogmatism, and ethnic orientation, all posit strong motivation for youth group membership and defining identity in the Tamale metropolis, Ghana.

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