

The Political Economy of Ganta City's Post-Conflict Land Disputes

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the post-conflict land disputes in Ganta City, Nimba County, and presents a picture of how the land disputes in the city have been driven by the interplay of political, economic, war-related, and socio-cultural factors. It presents the historical underpinnings of the land disputes, why some of the land disputes have been prolonged, the geo-economic value of the disputed land, why there continues to exist negative peace in the city, how the actual story and history of the pre-war ownership are, among other endogenous and exogenous factors. The data used to inform this paper was drawn from 103 persons who directly participated in this study. Sixty persons participated in the interviews, while 43 participated in the eight focus group discussions. The results show that before the First Liberian Civil War kicked off on December 24, 1989, significant parts of the main streets in the city were occupied by ethnic Mandingo merchants who used those spots for commercial purposes. As the two Liberian Civil Wars raged, they fled into refugee and displaced camps. When the Second Liberian Civil War subsided and things normalized, predominantly Mandingo refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) returned and met plots of land they have known and claimed to be theirs occupied. Some of the occupants were illegally authorized by the Ganta City Cooperation to settle on the parcels of land, while others settled on some on their own. Owing to the economic and other benefits some of the occupants had begun to accrue from being on the land, they found it difficult to easily leave. Some have taken an interest in either procuring the occupied land, while others have negotiated their stay through long leases. Resultantly, an economic revolution has taken place in the city. Business-minded elements of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups have taken charge of the city's commerce, especially along the main streets, and are playing domineering or leading roles in the economy of the city, while their Mandingo compatriots who previously dominated commerce in the city center operate on the periphery.

Keywords

Economic Revolution, Geo-Strategic, Post-Conflict, Land Disputes,
Economic, Political

1. Introduction

This article highlights the political economy of the post-conflict land disputes in Ganta, a city in Nimba County with about 62,000 inhabitants (Bøås et al., 2016). The city encompasses 26 communities with some rural villages within its eight-square miles' radius (Ganta City Corporation, 2021). Ganta City is located in a community of the Mah ethnic group. Owing to its metropolitan nature, it currently comprises the five recognized ethnic groups of Nimba: Dan, Mah, Krahn, Gbi, and Mandingo (Nimba County Development Agenda, 2008), even though there are other ethnic representations in the city. The First Liberian Civil War began on 24 December 1989, when rebel forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia through Buutuo, Nimba County (Meabe, 2018; Kieh, 2016). Some members of four of the five key ethnic groups in Nimba County aligned with government and anti-government forces and fought against each other. Some members of Dan and Mah ethnic groups on the one hand populated the rebel forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles G. Taylor and the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) under the leadership of Prince Y. Johnson. Some members of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups on the other hand populated the government forces of the late President Samuel K. Doe and later formed the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) to counter NPFL forces. ULIMO split into two along ethnic lines with the ethnic Mandingo-dominated segment named ULIMO-K (for ULIMO-Kromah under the leadership of Alhaji G. V. Kromah, an ethnic Mandingo), and ULIMO-J (for ULIMO-Johnson under the leadership of Roosevelt Johnson, an ethnic Krahn). During the second Liberia civil war from 1999 to 2003 that affected Ganta City, the Charles G. Taylor-led government forces were populated with some members of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups, while the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group under the leadership of Sekou D. Konneh was populated predominately by the Mandingo ethnic group. It goes without saying that members of the Dan and Mah and members of the Mandingo ethnic groups fought on opposite sides during both the first and second civil wars. The wars led to the displacement of many citizens of the county, including those from the commercial city of Ganta. When the wars ended, returnees came and met their plots of land occupied by individuals who acquired and occupied them during the warring and immediate post-war periods, and the situation sparked land disputes in many parts of Liberia, with Ganta not spared (Vapnek et al., 2017).

Ganta City's land disputes can be attributed to factors, including but not limited to economics, the two civil wars, politics, etc. The city's main street known for commercial activities before the 1990 war was dominated by people of the Mandingo ethnic group who operated stores, shops, petrol stations, garages, warehouses, and other commercial facilities (Interview, Ganta, 2021). The Congo/Americo-Liberian elites who migrated to the Central Province of Liberia on government assignments apportioned to themselves valuable parcels of land along the main streets of the city and quickly sold them to the willing and available buyers when their security was threatened, especially after the 1980 military coup that ousted President William R. Tolbert (Dash, 1980). Most members of the Mah ethnic groups were peasant farmers with very low incomes who showed little or no interest in purchasing the land placed on sale in a rush by the fleeing Congo/Americo-Liberian elites. Therefore, Mandingo traders who predominantly controlled the mining and commercial transport sectors plus other businesses acquired the land on sale for mainly commercial or business purposes before the First Liberian Civil War (Interview, Ganta, 2021).

During the first and second Liberian civil wars, the three major ethnic groups in Ganta (Dan, Mah, and Mandingo) played major roles on opposing sides. Earlier, especially during the aftermath of the failed 1985, General Thomas Quiwonkpa of the Dan ethnic group and his loyalists of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups were massacred by the Liberian army dominated by those from Doe's ethnic Krahn and supported by the Mandingoes, leading to "rivalry in Nimba County between Krahn and Mandingo on one side, and [Dan] and Mah, on the other side" (Olanrewaju et al., 2019). The animosity worsened during the two Liberian civil wars that gravely impacted Ganta City and explains why land disputes with ethnic, economic, political, and religious undertones emerged in the city after the wars.

2. Research Approach, Design, and Tools

An action research (AR) approach and a qualitative research method were used to study the underlying causes and effects of post-conflict land disputes in Ganta City. This article is a product of the "collective commitment to investigate" (Jensen & Laurie, 2016) the relationships between three of the ethnic groups in the city. Cooperative and participative collaboration (Harris & Kaye, 2017) between the co-researchers and me (researcher) contributed to identifying issues and attendant effects. It contributed to a concrete understanding of the reasons, attitudes, and drives underpinning people's behaviors towards each other and to interpret and make sense of them (Rosenthal, 2016, Mohajan, 2018).

The insufficiency of tools, the enormity of expenses, a lack of accuracy, and the inadequacy of human resources to cover the entire population create the need for a sample (Naderifar et al., 2017). The data-gathering process contributed to much clearer and better knowledge of the situation (Etikan et al., 2016). Hence, a quota (sample) of those in each of the ethnic groups that are knowledgeable about the causes, nature, degree, and results of the land disputes and

strained relationships in the city was recruited. They partook in the interviews and focus groups. Hence, a sample of the population became necessary for research. One hundred three (103) persons directly participated in this study. Sixty (60) persons participated in the interviews, while forty-three (43) persons participated in the focus group discussions. Using an action research approach and a qualitative research design, the research participants were purposively selected from the city based on their knowledge of the land and relationship issues. The research approach, and design as well as the sampling method used were helpful in understanding the interactions and relationships among the Dan, Mah, and Mandingo ethnic groups in Ganta City. Focus group discussions, interviews, and observations proved to help collect qualitative data in the field and ensure adherence to the triangulation principle. The various sources helped enhance the reliability and validity of the data and its analysis (Zohrabi, 2013).

3. Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

Before conducting this research, external actors have been intervening in land disputes in the city to ensure the return of the land to their appropriate owners without due regard firstly to the economic and political undertones on the ground and secondly to the relational issues. Some of these actors involved the Government of Liberia. Against this backdrop, this research found the appropriate theoretical structure, bearing, or foundation to establish that people working together at the local level with the appropriate capacities and character backed by culture and tradition are most likely to succeed than just external actors' intervention.

Hence, the action research that resulted in this article was underpinned by these two theories: community-based peacebuilding and indigenous knowledge. Using local capacities for peacebuilding and development purposes has made the theories relevant and useful to this study. These valuably interconnected theories are the strings that firmly held the research's fabric together. This research was an effort to unearth the major factors underpinning the land conflicts and strained relationships between some Mandingo people, on the one hand, and some Dan and Mah people, on the other hand. Most importantly, efforts were applied to ensure that contributions are made to a durable and sustainable solution that promotes peaceful coexistence in the city's communities. Therefore, community-based peacebuilding was necessary to enable sustainable peace and development through grassroots-level interventions (Ramnarain, 2015). The beliefs, culture, traditions, values, worldviews, and indigenous knowledge of Ganta citizens were useful in identifying common concerns, creating a mutual understanding of their situations, and advancing solutions for rebuilding relationships (Ademowo & Nuhu, 2017; Magni, 2017; Ramnarain, 2015).

4. Key Causes and Effects of Land Conflicts across African Communities

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (2015) indicate that: "[a]cts of violence, oppression,

revolt, civil war, and so forth, chequer the history of every African state.” Further to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard’s assertion, Besley and Reynal-Querol have identified four key reasons why African countries have been drowned in conflicts since independence: “1) natural resource dependence, 2) weak and poorly functioning political institutions, 3) ethnic fragmentation and polarization and 4) endemic poverty” (2014). In post-colonial Africa, a major conflict-related issue that confronts African societies is misunderstanding appertaining to land.

Land is regarded as a resource upon which physical development takes place and whose development and management interest its owner(s). It is an important part of the cultural identity of an individual, people, or community, with their economic, political, and social being inextricably linked to it. Customary land ownership, known as customary tenure, is “collectively owned land usually under the authority of traditional leadership” (Chimhowu, 2019). Customary land ownership is a way of the preservation of the culture of a community to which European colonizers were oblivious and held onto the belief that individual land ownership would have overtaken and made customary tenure extinct and become a “vestige of the past” (Home, 2020). The decision of the colonizers to declare most land public and the pursuit of such path by many post-colonial governments were to achieve two goals: 1) pave the way for individual land ownerships and 2) remove Africans or the governed without appropriate compensation and needed consultations to enable mining, forestry and wildlife projects of the colonizers and the governors to be undertaken (Home, 2020). While the Banjul Charter has given independent African countries the latitude to enforce property rights to address poverty and economic growth, customary and traditional land ownership and customary law and traditional land adjudication practices have remained intact across traditional African communities. The hybridity of the land governance system, where customary and statutory laws are used in the acquisition and use of land, cuts across African societies.

In African societies, the major types of land conflicts border on clashes between pastoralists and farmers, local resistance to the exploitation of natural resources, the tension between those considered strangers and indigenes, urban evictions, displacements resulting from foreign investments, inter-ethnic hate, customary land rights, peri-urban development, illegal allocation of land by some politicians and government officials, inheritance, population pressure, boundary disputes, urbanization, agricultural commercialization, multiple allocations of land and civil wars leading to massive displacement of people who return and meet their properties occupied (Home, 2020, Kobusingye, 2020, Owusu Ansah & Chigbu, 2020).

Owusu Ansah and Chigbu (2020) argue that land disputes have adversely affected communities and countries that suffer detrimental consequences in their economic, social, and physical developmental trajectories. Such disputes have contributed to the distortion of relationships, destruction and disruption of peace, depression, deaths, injuries, depopulation, reduction in crop production,

productivity loss, and reduction in households (Boone, 2012).

The Land Conflicts in Arumu, Northern Uganda, and their Similarities to the Ganta's

Land disputes in Ganta result from occupancies of properties claimed by returning internally displaced people and refugees. Ganta's situation is like that of Arumu in Northern Uganda, where from 1986 to 2006, the civil war destabilized the entire region and led to the displacement of 2,000,000 Ugandans, or 90% of the population that returned after the war, and met their land occupied, thereby plunging Arumu into land disputes (Kobusingye, 2020). Arumu's key challenges were the lack of documented evidence to establish proof of ownership that undermined enforcing land rights and reliance on boundary marks and oral evidence (Chelimo, 2015). For Ganta, some returnees met their land with structures already erected based on squatter's rights issued by the city authority. While Arumu's customary land tenure system did not allow individual land ownership but allowed community members to only 'live on the land, graze animals, and hunt' (Chelimo, 2015), in Ganta, the occupied and claimed parcels of land were and can be privately owned under the Liberian law.

To be able to address some of the issues in both Ganta and Arumu, the use of the courts and alternative dispute resolution to facilitate win-win solutions became necessary. While the courts used the Western approach to conflict resolution (WARC), which focuses on litigation, the Indigenous African Conflict Reconciliatory Strategies (IACRS) focus on reconciliation and facilitate the re-establishment of strained relationships that lead to "forgiveness" and "healing of individuals and groups" have been used (Okeke-Ogbuafor et al., 2019). In Arumu, the Ugandan Human Rights Commission, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Legal Aid Project of Uganda Law Society, Resident District Commissioner's Office (RDC), Uganda Land Alliance (ULA), Acholi Religious Peace Initiative (ALPI), and traditional and religious leaders were institutions actively involved in mediatory activities (Chelimo, 2015). In Ganta, these institutions have been involved in resolving the disputes: the First Ad Hoc Presidential Commission on Nimba Land and Properties' Disputes, the Second Ad Hoc Presidential Commission on Nimba Land and Properties Disputes, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Inter-peace.

5. Analysis of Land Disputes and Strained Relationships in Ganta City: Causes and Possible Motives

5.1. The Role of the 2003 Civil War

The land disputes in Ganta were ignited by several factors ranging from economic, hate, fear, and political manipulation. Before the 14-year civil war, especially pre-1990, the commercial district of Ganta, especially what is popularly known as Ganta Main Street, was predominantly occupied by people of the Mandingo ethnic group who were operating stores, shops, gas/petrol stations,

garages, warehouses, and other commercial facilities (Interview, Ganta, 2021). Some parcels of land in this part of Ganta were previous to occupancies by the Mandingo merchants owned by the Congo/Americo-Liberian elites who migrated to the Central Province of Liberia on government assignments. Upon the completion of their assignments or based on fear for their lives, mainly after the 1980 military coup that removed President William R. Tolbert from power (Dash, 1980) and dethroned the Congo/Americo-Liberian oligarchy, those assets were placed on the market for the available buyer(s). The dominant groups in Ganta before the wars were the majority Mah, who were peasant farmers with very low income and earnings to buy the land or with little or no interest in purchasing the land in the first place; while the minority Mandingo people were traders who predominantly controlled the mining and commercial transport sectors plus other businesses (Interview, Ganta, 2021). Owing to the economic status of the Mandingoes, they were opportune to have the economic edge over their Mah compatriots. They succeeded in purchasing most, if not all, of the properties on sale. Consequently, the Mandingo merchants most occupied the Main Street area in Ganta for mainly commercial or business purposes without any challenge antecedent to the commencement of the First Liberian Civil War.

When the first and second Liberian civil wars started and raged on, they took a tribal path owing to ethnic dominance per warring faction. Thus, atrocities committed by these ethnically dominated warring factions from the three major ethnic groups in Ganta (Dan, Mah, and Mandingo) played major roles in generating the Ganta land disputes. However, the current situation with the disputed land in Ganta has narrowed over the years and is now anchored on two key pillars, economics and politics. These two factors have become the major motivations behind people's desire to either want the land back or not relinquish the land to the claimants.

Even before the second Liberia Civil War, there had been bad blood among four of the five tribes in Nimba County. Olanrewaju et al. (2019) state that Thomas Quiwonkpa of the Dan ethnic group and his loyalists of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups were massacred by the Liberian army after the failed 1985 coup. They indicated that the army was dominated by those from Doe's ethnic Krahn and supported by the Mandingoes. Hence, the misunderstanding among the three ethnic groups in Ganta reflects the 'rivalry in Nimba County between Krahn and Mandingo on one side, and Dan and Mah, on the other side, characterized by religious, ethnic, and political undercurrent' (Olanrewaju et al., 2019). It explains why even today, the issues involving some of the Dan, Mah, and Mandingo people in Ganta have ethnic, political, and religious undertones.

5.2. Contribution of the Ganta City Authority to the Land Conflicts

As reflected in Table 1 which is below, the Mayor Nohn Tensonnon-led city authority of Ganta issued thirty-three (33) squatter rights on private land in

Table 1. List of people that the Ganta City authority issued squatters' rights in 2004 and 2005.

No.	Name	Amount Paid in Liberian Dollars (LRD)	Date issued	Location
1	Sam Kollie	500.00	1/20/04	Main Street
2	Emmanuel Nani	500.00	2/4/04	Main Street
3	Henretta Mantor	500.00	2/4/04	Old Mkt. Street
4	Bill T. Tensonnon	500.00	2/5/04	Main Street
5	Marie Mesuop	500.00	2/5/04	Behind Okar Garage
6	Nyee N. Blegay	500.00	10/2/04	Saclepea road
7	Jesus Never fails Business Center	500.00	10/2/04	Saclepea Road
8	Amos T. Sonkarlay	500.00	2/10/04	Main Street
9	Peter Constant	500.00	3/3/04	Towel Town
10	Wilfred Gwaikolo	500.00	3/3/04	Sackepea Road
11	Albert T. Martin	500.00	4/3/04	Main Street
12	JB Original B/C	500.00	4/28/04	Saclepea Road
13	Henry Port	500.00	4/29/04	Main Street
14	Leatee Z. Troah	500.00	4/29/04	People Street
15	Obeto B. Saywah	500.00	4/29/04	People Street
16	James Watson L. Loyd	500.00	5/03/05	Saclepea Parking
17	De-ke-ta B/center	500.00	5/18/05	Main Street
18	Jacob Toe	500.00	5/04/05	Yini School Street
19	God Grace B/Center	500.00	5/6/05	Main Street
20	Wingus Business Center	150.00	5/07/04	Main Street
21	Oldman Paygermed Store	150.00	6/3/04	Saclepea road
22	Prince S. Menah	500.00	6/4/04	Main Street
23	Mr. Beone Walker	500.00	6/12/04	Unknown
24	His Grace B/Center	150.00	5/12/05	Main Street
25	Mr. Suah	500.00	6/16/04	Yini School Street
26	Allison Zarwolo	150.00	6/14/04	Old Mkt. Street
27	Jeremiah Koom/Prophet Bus	1000.00	6/15/04	Main Street
28	Dune	300.00	6/15/04	Tobacco Street
29	Arthur B/Center	200.00	6/15/04	Main Street
30	Borbor Nyumah B/Center	300.00	6/15/04	Main Street
31	JJ Brothers B/Center	500.00	6/15/04	Main Street
32	Samuel S. Zonie	-	-	-
33	Peter Doroyazea	-	-	-
Total amount		13,900.00	-	-

Source: [Johnson, 2008](#). The final report of the first ad hoc presidential commission on Nimba land and property dispute. Republic of Liberia.

2004 and 2005, amounting to thirteen thousand nine hundred Liberian Dollars (13,900.00LRD) (Johnson, 2008). Issuing these rights on parcels of land that did not belong to the city corporation became problematic and a major source of the land *mêlée* in the city. The Mandingo returned and found it difficult to reclaim their land in the early ages after the war. Most squatters initially created little or no room to discuss with the claimants the idea and possibility of relinquishing their occupied land. At the same time, the city corporation applied little or no significant efforts to remedy the problems it had created. The “build there, nobody will remove you” assurance given to the squatters made them feel justified living or using the claimed parcels of land. Some built valuable and durable structures that they could not easily relinquish without compensation.

The city authority successfully implemented this action using the pretext of giving a facelift to the city of Ganta, since the landowners were not around to carry out development (Interview, Ganta, 2021). In the opinion of the city authority, people who could develop the abandoned land needed to proceed with work. In some instances, very short notices were issued to owners urging them to develop the land or risk losing the land. Some of those people to whom the notices were intended were still in exile and could not receive copies. The deadlines given expired, and the action of the city authority to issue squatters’ rights was implemented. The city authority made it appear that those people refused to adhere to the development demands of the city authority; hence it acted to facilitate development. In the end, the parcels of land experienced claimant-occupant conflicts whose resolution the city took little or no interest in until the national government and other interventions were made to resolve them.

5.3. The Economic Reasons undergirding the Land Conflicts

In the preface to their published Land in Africa Conference (summary and conclusion compiled) held in London in November of 2004, Julian Quan et al. (2004) indicated that land lies at the heart of social, political and economic life in most of Africa, where agriculture, natural resources and other land-based activities are fundamental to livelihoods, food security, incomes and employment. Land also continues to have major historical and spiritual significance for Africa’s people. At one time land seemed an almost inexhaustible asset in Africa, but population growth and market development are creating mounting pressure and competition for land resources, especially close to towns and cities, and in productive, high-value areas.

Ganta’s status as the commercial hub in Nimba County continues to gain more attraction. The city attracts more people from rural Nimba County and other parts of Liberia. Commercial centers in the city, especially Ganta Main Street and the Ganta Saclepea Road, have become areas of immense interest for commercial purposes. Hence, the interest of some of the occupants on disputed land to relocate has never emerged. In economic terms, the land disputes in Ganta have evolved into an economic revolution for some and a nightmare for

others. The original property owners have been languishing in refugee camps and other parts, while the secondary owners are accruing profits from using their plots of land. Before the conflict, those currently in possession of the land and properties in contention were low-income earners or never heard of regarding their participation in commercial activities. By taking over those properties, they have experienced the goodness of living in wealth. They cannot afford to return to where they were: subsistence farming and iron wage livelihood activities.

The Mandingoes who led, controlled, and dominated the trade and commerce of Ganta until the civil wars took a couple of years to return to the city after the second civil war. Their prolonged absence resultantly paved the way for the Dan and Mah's dominance of businesses in the city. Before then, members of the Mandingo ethnic group hugely promoted cross-border trade in kola nuts, coffee, cocoa beans, kerosene, peanuts, beans, and transportation (Interview, Ganta, 2021). The situation has changed as Dan and Mah dominate these businesses. Additionally, some Dan and Mah now own and operate hotels, motels, night-clubs, restaurants, bars, entertainment centers, general merchandise, and most of the provision shops in the city, in addition to schools and clinics. The change in the situation has now practically confined members of the Mandingo ethnic group to a few tea shops, garages, schools, and provision shops.

Many persons (citizens and non-citizens alike) have inordinate desires to access and maintain land on Ganta Main Street as properties like warehouses, shops, stores, and other commercial buildings bequeath to their owners enormous economic benefits. Hence the economic benefits associated with owning land on the main streets of Ganta have contributed to and continue to serve as one of the two key pillars of the land disputes. Most land occupants' fear of losing economic benefits being accrued from the land remains the key reason.

5.4. The Political Reasons associated with the Land Conflicts

Nimba is the second most populous county in Liberia, next to Montserrado County. Since the Country's return to democratic rule in 2006, Nimba has continued to play a key role in Liberia's electoral democracy as a decider. Most of the people who are elected or appointed to political positions are either from the Dan or Mah ethnic (Interview, Ganta, 2021). Because of the sentiments coming out of the two civil wars, fueled by atrocities committed by the different ethnically dominated warring factions, strained relationships continue to exist despite relative calm in the county, particularly the commercially attractive Ganta City. Being fully aware of the sentiments usually expressed by people of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups on one hand and that of the Mandingoes on the other hand, politicians would naturally cast their lot with the majority group in expectation of political capital as in electoral (Focus group, Ganta, 2021). This is achieved by either direct assurance of support on this land issue or deliberately keeping it on the back burner to avoid it being a political football that could undermine elec-

toral campaigns. On the national level, a president is careful of making interventions that could have political backlashes or stir up tension or violence in the country. The government of former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf made efforts to find an amicable solution to the disputes but there is still much to be done. The questions are these: how far can a sitting president go in trying to resolve this land issue? Were the government interventions cosmetic? Or is there politics being played here? Given the fact that it is a minority group that is contending for occupied land, it is safe in the mind of the local and national leadership to “let sleeping dog lie”. Let’s look at the Government’s declaration of eminent domain on the Ganta Central Market. The state has the right to obtain private property and provide just compensation (Kitchens & Roomets, 2015; *The Constitution of the Republic of Liberia*, 1986). The state, through the government, lawfully expropriates private property for public use (Peña, 2021). Private ownership of property cannot stand in the way of public projects. Howbeit, payment must be made to the person or persons that have long-lasting legal ownership rights or “sole and despotic dominion” over the property (Colombatto & Tavormina, 2017; Blackstone, 2017).

Former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf declared eminent domain on Ganta Central Market in 2010. The decision appeared reasonable for two reasons: 1) the public has already been using the place as a market ground and 2) the controversy between the claimants and occupants. There was an inadequacy of information on the legitimate ownership of the land on which the market is located. For any expropriation, just compensation must be provided to the private property owners. Therefore, there needed to have been a process that established ownership. Before the declaration of eminent domain, the ownership of the claimed parcels of land was not adequately or fully established (Interview, Ganta, 2021). So, beyond a mere declaration of eminent domain, nothing was done to justly compensate the claimants who have continuously laid claims to the parcel of land. Hence, the disgruntlement of the Mandingo claimants in the market area perpetuates!

While evoking eminent domain represented the best decision in this controversial case, such a decision is seen as structural (Focus group, Ganta, 2021). One thing is clear: the group that occupied the place, much to the dislike of the returning refugees, remains on the ground and selling in the area. Nothing has happened in favor of the claimants. This has made the claimants feel a sense of government-led conspiracy of dispossession and denial of their entitlement (land). The feeling of double denial thus exists: 1) the denial of access to their land and 2) the denial of their just compensation to help them relocate.

5.5. The Role of Inter-Ethnic/Inter-Religious Marriage in the Land Conflicts

Inter-religious marriage is one issue that has contributed to some form of discomfort in the relationships among the Dan, Mandingo, and Mah people of

Ganta City. The Dan and Mah have contended that they easily give their sisters and daughters' hands in marriages to their Mandingo compatriots, but the opposite has been either non-existent or unheard of long before the wars and even after (Interview, Ganta, 2021). This, they contend, is an attempt by the Mandingo ethnic group to look down upon them. The Mandingoes contend that it is not religiously and culturally permissible for girls and women to marry people who are not of the Islamic faith. Thus, this represents a clash of interests at that level that has sufficed as an issue.

To effectively understand the issues of inter-ethnic/religious marriage, it becomes necessary to understand inter-ethnic/religious marriage itself. On the one hand, inter-ethnic marriage is when two persons from two different ethnic groups cross ethnic boundaries and agree to become married. On the other hand, inter-religious marriage is when two persons from two different religions cross their religious boundaries and agree to become married (Berghe, 1997). In such marriages, the couples belong to different ethnic groups and religious beliefs and affiliations. Behavior, beliefs, ceremonies, customs, and observation of religious holidays are how people realize diverse cultural values and practices in a given society. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriage concerns emerged as some of the issues that contributed to strained relationships among the Dan, Mandingo, and Mah people and the land conflict in Ganta. Some Dan and Mah elements voiced that efforts to marry Mandingo girls have repeatedly culminated in futility for ethnic and religious reasons for which some were not excited to wholeheartedly welcome the Mandingoes back to the city after the March 2003 Ganta War (Interview, Ganta, 2021).

The Mandingo ethnic group of the Islamic religion has found it very difficult, if not impossible, to allow their daughters into marriage with other ethnic groups, even if their daughters wish to do so. Some of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups contend that they allow their daughters to pursue the paths of marriage and even allow them to get married to Mandingo boys or men, but they cannot benefit reciprocally. There are visible negative reactions and disapproval of Mandingo's approach to inter-religious marriage that have strained inter-ethnic relationships. The established mode of operation of the Mandingo ethnic group as it relates to marriage is their daughters' hands are never given into marriage to non-Mandingo people. The fear of losing the person to a non-Mandingo is one fact. Also, the person's fear of letting go of her religious belief is a chief factor. Hence, a Mandingo girl, lady, or woman's coverage of preference for a husband is constricted to the Mandingo ethnic group and confirms Coombs' statement that: ... social class, religion, and ethnicity, simply provide a "field of eligibles" (available persons)... this accounts for the tendency to marry homogeneously" (1966).

Marriage in the Mandingo community is underpinned by tribal and religious reasons intended to foster and ensure ethnic homogeneity and to avoid subjugation for whatsoever reasons. In as much as needs complementary matters in the

marriage of the Mandingo community, it is not so important that religious and ethnic concerns are subordinated. Hence, needs complementary in a relationship or marriage operate within the limit and parameters of ethnicity and religion, especially when giving the girl child out into marriage. This emphasis robs the Dan and Mah boys or men from easily getting married to the Mandingo girls or ladies of their desire or choice.

The Mandingo tribe can afford to allow marriages of non-Mandingo girls or women. Such happens in expectation of and understanding that interactions would help shape those girls or women in the ways of their husbands. When such interactions occur in Muslim homes, they help mold the girls' or women's lives toward being good Muslims. The latter will bring their children, born into the relationship or marriage, up in line with Islamic pieces of training and guidelines. The Mandingo tribe holds these Islamic requirements dearly and cannot afford to let go of them easily. Marriages in the Mandingo tribe are not necessarily a free-choice state of affairs, while those of the Dan and Mah ethnic groups are a free-choice state of affairs. This has also impacted the relationships between and amongst elements of the ethnic groups.

6. Nature and Categories of Land Cases in Ganta City

The land conflicts in Ganta fall into the following categories (Interview, Ganta, 2021):

- 1) Disputes over parcels of land involving returning refugees or internally displaced Mandingoes who had come to see their land occupied illegally.
- 2) Disputes between occupants and claimants in which the occupants are willing to leave the land but are yet to be given compensation like others to whom the Government of Liberia (GoL) provided compensation ("Peace Packages") in 2011 or 2012 and left because the GoL had introduced the compensation before leaving land culture.
- 3) Disputes between occupants and claimants in which the occupants were willing to accept the Government of Liberia's compensation to leave but sadly met their demises, and their families are not ready to live by the spirits and intents of the agreements reached by the deceased with the survival claimants.
- 4) Disputes between occupants and claimants in which the occupants contend that they are willing to accept the Government of Liberia's compensation but contend that those who evaluated and valued their properties on the occupied parcels of land reportedly undervalued them.

7. The Consequences of the Land Disputes

7.1. Consequence(s) on the Claimants

Many claimants cannot return to their parcels of land to use or benefit from as they should or want. To be able to continue to own the land in the face of the fact that some of them do not have any legal documentation to authenticate their ownership of the parcels of land because they might have lost the documents

during the war or do not have any now, claimants have been left with little or no alternatives but to enter into long-term lease agreement with occupants who have built costly facilities/structures on the land (Interview, Ganta, 2021). The claimants are faced with two situations; 1) they cannot pay for the structures on the land to have full access to the land, and 2) they cannot press charges against the occupants since some of them do not have legal documentation and those with documents in most cases don't have the support of the courts to ensure that they succeed in ejecting the occupants. The best way out has been to agree to negotiate with the occupants even if they did not initially wish to do so. Hence, the original occupants and owners of the parcels of land along the Ganta Main Streets before the wars are not the current occupants of the land. Some of the claimants who live on trade are now economically disadvantaged. The properties that they had owned prior to the war(s) and which they had previously used as sources of income generation via commercial activities are no longer in their possession. They have become vulnerable people playing limited roles in the city's commerce, trade, or economy unlike what they did prior to the civil wars.

7.2. Consequence(s) on the Occupants

The occupants who know that they live on disputed parcels of land for which they have no legal entitlements whatsoever, even in the face of some backing keeping them there, cannot develop or invest in the parcels of land they occupy meaningfully as doing so would be economically not witty and accordingly precarious. Hence, they live on, occupy, or sell in structures on the land without any enthusiasm to modernize or better the places up to their satisfaction levels. Only those with long leases are, on the strength of the confidence in said leases, seen with massive and gigantic infrastructural investments. They make those investments with the understanding and surety to recoup them before the leases expire. It, however, goes without saying that such occupants invest carefully and strategically, knowing that where they have spent their money does not belong to them.

7.3. Consequence(s) on Investment and the Economy

The fact that there have been occasional tensions between claimants and occupants of the land in the city raises investment security concerns. As a result, those who should otherwise run at jet speed to invest in Ganta City and its economic growth are proceeding very gingerly or at a snail's pace. They fear the emergence of full-blown conflict(s) from the tension between claimants and occupants. This has slowed economic investments to some extent no matter how minimal it appears. As a result, only a few risk-takers are investing in the city's economy. Had the looming insecurity of major investments not been the case in the city, the city that stands as only second to Monrovia in terms of population and development would have grown faster and further than it is now (Focus group, Ganta, 2021). When everybody, specifically every ethnic group (Dan,

Mandingo, Mah, etc.), can freely invest and compete in the market space in Ganta City, everybody will have something in the city to protect jealously. With some people denied regaining their properties and competing freely in the economy, insecurity looms. The statement by some irritated and frustrated members of the Mandingo community that they are prepared to “die for their rights” is no minor threat to overlook (Interview, Ganta, 2021).

7.4. Consequence in the Form of Limited on Access to Land by the Mandingoes

Ganta is being beautified and developed by some Dan and Mah people who are investing in the city's growth on parcels of land that are not in dispute. Those development projects are being undertaken, with limited involvement of the Mandingoes, who complain of having inadequate access to land (Interview, Ganta, 2021). Even though they want to undertake other development projects that would bequeath to them economic benefits like their Dan and Mah compatriots, their expectations have conflicted with reality. Their access to such land is limited. Some elements of the Mandingo ethnic group contend that since the end of the civil wars compounded by the land disputes, they have had very limited access to the acquisition of private land in the communities of Ganta. They ventilated that the predominant Mah landowners in the city and its environs have continually exhibited incremental reluctance in selling other parcels of land in which they have developed interests.

7.5. Consequence of Improved Mandingo Community's Coagulation

Historically, people of the Mandingo ethnic group love to live together as a community and share available socio-cultural facilities such as schools, mosques, well, etc. While their inclination to live together seems to be a natural first instinct, the land disputes have over the years provided sufficient reasons why the Mandingoes should stick together as a community if they must succeed. This reinforcing coagulant of the Mandingo community has paid off over the years in the form of a “touch one, touch all” ethnic bond. While land ownership in Ganta, like any other city in Nimba County and Liberia, is not ethnic but individual, the Mandingo community's coagulation has driven them now to the point that when an attempt is made on one person via eviction based on a court's ruling, the entire Mandingo community gets infuriated and rises spontaneously in defense of such person. The case of the demolition of ten houses belonging to four Mandingo families in Ganta is a case in point ([Front Page Africa, 2021](#)). In the end, the land situation in the city has given more reasons for the minority Mandingo ethnic group to be more united than ever before.

7.6. The Mandingo Ethnic Group's Participation in Local Politics in Electoral District # 1, Nimba County

Participation in politics involves decision-making on issues that affect the life of

a community, in this instant case, the city. It means and reasonably encapsulates the holistic participation of a people or group in reaching decisions on a majority of issues concerning their community and well-being. The Mandingo people participate minimally in most decisions made in the city. However, every qualified citizen partakes in one sphere of decision-making in the city, whether others like it or not. That participation comes with one's citizenship right in the Republic of Liberia: registering and participating in electoral processes by canvassing and voting for candidates of one's choice.

Mayoral elections have not been held in the city since former President Charles G. Taylor's regime. Hence, mayors have always been appointed by the President of Liberia and have all been of the Mah ethnic group (Interview, Ganta, 2021). The citizens of Ganta have only been participating in representative and senatorial elections during general and presidential elections, special or mid-term senatorial elections, and by-elections. The election that particularly concerns the city is the election for the position of representative of Electoral District #1 (during the 2011, 2017, and 2023 Representatives and Presidential elections), previously #2 during the 2005 General and Presidential Elections.

The Mandingo ethnic group in Ganta has, after the 2005 elections, seen insufficient reasons to canvass and vote for Mah candidates, who are from the city or its environs that participate in representative elections. They have been doing so for two fundamental reasons: 1) they are very much interested in electing someone who will help them reclaim their properties, and so voting for a non-Mah person in any election, to them, presents the best chance to elect a non-participant in their denial process, and 2) voting for a Mah of Ganta and Bain-Garr to be representative would re-establish Mah dominance in all spheres of decision making in the city since the Mah people appear to entirely control the City Council of Ganta and occupy the mayor position as well (Interview, Ganta, 2021).

Consequently, the Mandingo people have always supported a non-Mah candidate in the last four representative elections of 2011, 2017, 2021, and 2023 which led to the election of former Representative, former Senator, and now Vice President Jeremiah Kpan Koung twice and Sam Brown twice as well. The metropolitan and the commercial nature of the city have disadvantaged the Mah people electorally. The citification of the community comes with many opportunities that have magnetized many people to the city. The people who have gotten attracted to the city because of opportunities existent therein have been branded as strangers. This terminology has made the strangers coagulate against those (the Mah people) who are the city's original inhabitants. Against this backdrop, the Bain/Ganta Mah people have been finding it very difficult to win the representative seat in what is now known as District #1, Nimba County. With this trend, one can easily conclude that when mayoral elections are introduced in the city, the Bain/Ganta Mah people will become victims of gang-up politics and may suffer a similar fate as the representative election.

8. Conclusion

Land disputes across the city continue to persist for two key economic and political reasons. The Dan and Mah on the one hand and the Mandingoes on the other hand continue to struggle over land ownership because after the Second Liberian Civil War, returning Mandingo refugees and internally displaced people met land they previously occupied being settled on or claimed by individuals of the Dan or Mah extraction.

This situation was fueled by individuals' economic reasons or the Ganta City's authority then improper issuance of squatters' rights as well as roles the various ethnic groups played during the first and second Liberian civil wars. This land occupancy frenzy occurred after the invasion of Ganta in March 2003 by ethnic Mandingo-dominated LURD rebels. The ethnic Mandingo-dominated LURD rebels' invasion angered some ethnic Dan and Mah who resented the Mandingoes' return to Ganta. Additionally, the deliberate denial of the Dan and Mah men from marrying Mandingo ladies for obvious religious reasons has also played a role in this resentment.

The major interest of the Dan and Mah merchants in the land dispute is economic, and this has influenced the politics. Hence, their decision not to relinquish their enviable position in the city's economy and commerce continues. This economic reason plays a major role in the sustenance of the land dispute up to date, coupled with political actors' avoidance of this political football or their subtle endorsement of it for obvious political reasons. To complicate things, the Government of Liberia's blind declaration of an eminent domain of the Ganta Market land claimed by some Mandingo families without identifying appropriate landowners and providing just compensations has frustrated the land claimants who hold onto the belief that the Government of Liberia, in addition to the Ganta City Corporation, is a shareholder in denying them their entitlement and frustrating their efforts. Consequently, Dan and Mah's merchants dominate the city's commerce and economy after the wars, while Mandingo merchants played marginal roles against their wishes.

Some Mandingo land claimants have not been able to reclaim their land, while others are left with little or no alternatives but to lease their land to at least gain economic benefits from them in the meantime until, at such time in the future, they can entirely reclaim it. The fear of the emergence of destructive full-blown conflict lingers stubbornly in the city. Hence, investment security concerns have impacted, to some extent, the city's speedy economic growth and sustainable development than it would have otherwise been.

9. Recommendations

The Ganta City Corporation that issued thirty-three (33) squatters rights on private properties igniting conflict should cease doing so moving further and make genuine efforts at resolving some of the crises it created. Political actors need to work in facilitating mediatory dialogues between and among disputants

to resolve any conflict, knowing that the use of traditional and other means can be very helpful. Political manipulations of the conflict based on narrow political interests that facilitate the prolonging of any dispute need to be eschewed with genuine steps taken to help in restoring full stability, peace, and security to the city. There is a need for the Dan, Mandingoes and Mah to compete freely and fairly without any hindrance or exclusion based on their ethnicity and fear of domination. This will engender further economic growth and infrastructure development of the city. On the issue of marriage, it is pursued based on one's preference and informed by many factors, including but not limited to ethnic and religious concerns. To ensure religious and ethnic harmony, members of the ethnic groups have to respect and tolerate each other's views, choices and beliefs as well as understand and accept that ethnic and religious beliefs and values inform some marriage decisions for which no grudges should be kept. It is advisable that further conflict prevention, resolution, transformation, and peacebuilding mechanism(s) be in place to help deal with any harmful attitudes and beliefs among the three major ethnic groups to create an atmosphere for increased cooperation and harmonious relationships. With such mechanism(s), the current negative/cold peace in Ganta will be transformed into positive/warm peace.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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