



Original research article

The symbolic violence of debt discourse: Protesting electricity bills in Kroboland, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the contested accounts of protesting and indebted electricity users in Kroboland, Ghana (2014–2022), during periods of heightened utility debt burdens. Utility debts have many causes beyond consumer nonpayment, but these debts have become normalized as economic-legal necessities, leaving the policy-oriented literature focused on residential bills as the main source for cost-recovery. Bill protests are then presented as consumer unwillingness to pay or entitlement to services; this discourse is often supported by elite media and academic literature. Through examining Krobo's electricity bill protests, we find that protests are driven by inconsistent billing practices, aggressive disconnection tactics, the transition to prepaid meters, and historical grievances. We argue that the policy-discourse of debt, whereby the Big Debts of utilities are kept in the shadow of the small debts of ordinary consumers, and the media-discourse of protests, whereby legitimate grievances are interpreted as cultures of nonpayment, can be understood as instances of Bourdieu's symbolic violence. Our research shows that such discourse suppression has led to a way of seeing both debt and protests in an anti-poor manner. We conclude that simple accounts of complex contestations are unlikely to produce politically acceptable or economically viable energy policies.

1. Introduction

“*[The Minister of Energy], who described illegal connection [sic] as a drain on the country's economy called on the media to support him....*”

GhanaWeb, 2018¹

Central to the heavy financing of large-scale grid projects is the expectation that electricity can transform lives. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), clean and modern energy access through grid services is a development goal for national governments, multilateral donors, non-governmental organizations, and policy-oriented research. While smaller-scale distributed energy systems are growing, capital-intensive electrical grids are still expanding, albeit slowly, to reach more underserved communities. The question of who pays for these services, and how much they should pay, has accompanied the growth of such infrastructure.

As tariffs have risen in many parts of the world, often justified as helping electricity providers cover their costs, non-payment of bills, unauthorized and non-metered connections, and protests at higher tariffs have been analyzed as the “unwillingness” of low-income consumers to pay their service bills [1]. The resultant inability to recover costs is considered a major barrier to extending or upgrading the electricity grid

[2–4]. Together, these perspectives are cementing narratives of large, unpaid consumer debts to the utility and of “cultures” of nonpayment and/or entitlement among low-income populations in LMICs.

Yet consumer debts must be understood against the background of the multi-scalar debt relations that have become the “new normal” in the contemporary world [5]. Furlong [6] argues that infrastructure-led debt in countries experiencing periodic bouts of debt crisis and devaluation, produces utilities that hold “significant negative value”; full-cost recovery then becomes a mechanism to pay down utility debts [6], though it is justified as a means to improve or extend services. In the process, these multi-scalar debts become naturalized [5]. The very complexity of transnational financial arrangements makes large debts hard to understand and to “see.” In its place, consumer protests and nonpayment, more visible and more easily understood, especially through media reports [7], have become the central story of debt within public services.

In this paper we argue that the selective discourse of debt, wherein the Big Debt of utilities is kept in the shadow of the small debts of ordinary consumers, can be understood as an instance of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence [8,9]. Symbolic violence describes the cultural channels – such as ideas, language, and discourse – through which power is exercised, but in so “naturalized” a manner that its self-

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¹ See <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Peter-Amewu-vows-to-deal-with-illegal-electricity-connection-678185>.

interested logic is seen as the objective logic of disinterest [10]. Bourdieu argues that it is this very misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) that gives symbolic violence its power over subordinated classes. Gramsci's framework of manufacturing consent of the non-elite refers to a related concept [11,12]: that power can be upheld by organized leadership and their hegemonic discourses. The theoretical insight here is that discourses are social projects that come to be seen as natural; while Gramsci foregrounds the organized production of consent through ideological leadership, Bourdieu emphasizes the pre-reflexive acceptance of hierarchy through misrecognition. In this instance, we suggest that the agenda-setting power of debt discourse is perpetuated through a pre-reflexive acceptance of the official story, making invisible the legacy debts of the service provider while rendering visible the debts of residential consumers.

We analyze contested discourses of protesting, and indebted, electricity users in an era of high utility debt burdens. With the complexities of global financial investments largely overlooked by both scholars and non-scholars [8], we question the focus on the low-income customer as the locus of cost-recovery initiatives. We draw on Bourdieu's concept of language as (invisible) power and argue that, while unpaid bills do indeed pose financial problems for utilities, utility debts have many substantial causes other than consumer nonpayment. However, the debt carried by utilities tends to be naturalized and treated as an economic-legal standing condition [13]. The main focus in the press and academia has been on how to manage debt that consumers owe to the utility.

By following the debt story in the electricity bill protests in Krobo-land, Ghana (2014–2022), we show how protests against tariff hikes are more than just a reflection of poverty and austerity, however important these may be. We show that protests may also be driven by the region's variable bills, histories of being let down by the utility, and rapidly changing payment regimes and policies. These grounded materialities counter pervasive accounts of consumers' unwillingness to pay and "entitlement" to services that continue to characterize these protests [1], often supported by (English-language) press reports and given credence by the economics and policy literatures on nonpayment (e.g., [14]). Drawing on the coverage of bill protests in the professionalized media, interviews with protest leaders, and protestors' own words on platforms such as X (Twitter) and TikTok, we argue that these protests reflect broken debt-creditor contracts and material disillusionment. The Krobo case shows that directly or indirectly blaming the poor for "failing" to be responsible consumers is itself a discourse of symbolic violence, using language and terms that do not match those used by subordinated classes [15]. It can (i) divert attention from provider debt to consumer debt; (ii) divert attention from the utility's own shortcomings; (iii) become the default explanation for protests and nonpayment, even when the causes of these may lie elsewhere; and thus (iv) allow big debt to hide behind small debts in accounts of the cost-recovery imperative for LMIC utilities.

2. The infrastructural cost-recovery turn and debt as discourse

Cost recovery as an explicit policy imperative is a recent feature of post-WWII international development. Dams and large energy systems were meant to ignite the economies of post-colonial nations but were also part of the nation-building project [16]. They were Cold War geopolitical tools, as the USA and other countries were willing to provide dam financing and technical support to forge strategic alliances [17]. Dam projects also fed the public aspirations of leaders across post-colonial nations. In South Asia, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India famously declared that dams were "the temples" of modern India [18]. In sub-Saharan Africa, the first President of independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, set his legacy on Akosombo Dam – "A Dam for Africa" – that embodied the grand visions of a pan-Africanist leader [19].

In this context, cost recovery was largely an afterthought. Much of

the electricity generated by hydro-electric dams was intended for large industries (e.g., the aluminum industry in Ghana) and thus sold "cheap" [20]. Residential grid extensions were spatially uneven and politically motivated: elite enclaves were favored over the average neighborhoods, mirroring long-held practices of colonial-era infrastructure development [21,22]. When the hoped-for industries failed to materialize or become self-supporting, and unused generation remained, governments turned to broader electrification strategies to absorb surplus capacity and justify sunk investments. In East Africa, for instance, rural electrification was pursued when "outlets for electricity were badly needed to obtain minimum revenue in order to at least cover running costs..." [23], p. 3. Broader electrification also became a vote-winning strategy (see [24] for Indonesia) and state-building effort (see [25] for Ghana and Uganda).

The economic realities of residential electrification were such that cost recovery from individual users was not held to be viable. Without heavily subsidized rates the average customer (even urban) would hardly be able to afford electrical services. Unless readily necessary in their everyday lives (such as for lights), new electrical appliances would require "inducement rates," to entice consumption – as was case even in the industrialized world [26]. Financiers understood that grid extensions would require cost-recovery tactics that did not rely on households. For instance, the World Bank would only agree to finance grids in Ghana after two prominent gold and diamond mines agreed to forgo their own electricity generation and instead get it from the state-run electric company [19]. Finally, publicly financed infrastructures could, if needed, recover costs from taxes or state borrowing and other government instruments [27].

Through the 1980s and the 1990s, disillusionment with capital-intensive nation building projects grew, and the symbolic nationalist value of electricity infrastructure began to recede. Electricity was seen by donor-governments and financiers as a commodity and an important economic input. This change was a logical consequence of a broader turn to the market and a disavowal of the state as service provider in the global political economy [28], even as some states remained active service providers [29]. During and following these decades there was greater emphasis on cost recovery for electricity and water services from users rather than from the general taxpayer [30]; changes in payment schemes, such as prepaid rather than postpaid meters, accompanied these institutional shifts [31,32]. These gradual shifts were promoted both by the World Bank [33] and by emerging policies such as New Public Management that recommended private-sector strategies for public-sector efficiency [34]. The consumer therefore faced greater commercialization of everyday services, in keeping with the neoliberal turn globally.

In the wake of these shifting roles of state and market, academic and policy discourses on cost recovery from energy users have focused on the need for utilities to break even, extend services, and keep the systems upgraded (see [2,35,36]). The need for the utility to repay its debt or the state to repay its debt to the lender (internal or external) is under-examined, other than in some critical scholarship (see [37]). By the structural reforms of the '80s and '90s, "developing" countries had about one third of their public investments going towards the power sector [25]. Debt burdens also accumulated when local currencies depreciated against the dollar. Cost recovery from customers can address only some of these challenges.

Utilities recover costs from their customers through tariffs (that can be raised), expanded metering (postpaid or prepaid), and disconnections when customers have not paid their bills. It is widely acknowledged that low-income consumers resort to unauthorized connections and pay bills late or not at all. The social sciences literature frames these behaviors as "coping" with poor services (e.g. [38,39]), or as the "quiet encroachment" of poor users who are trying to acquire essential services that they cannot pay for [40]. The energy policy and energy economics literature, while acknowledging the challenges of timely payments, often blames these behaviors on consumers' "unwillingness" to pay, electricity "theft", or "entitlement" [41]. Debts owed by institutions and

companies, who often have large unpaid utility bills [41], are rarely the focus of non-payment reports.

In our analysis of debt, non-payment and protests in the Krobo region of Ghana, we show that the main electricity provider in Ghana is indeed heavily indebted. Drawing on press reports, documents, electronic media, and interviews, we show that the Krobo protests against the bill payment regime and prepaid meters were commonly presented as unwillingness to pay for electricity services, “thievery” and irrational demands. We find that the protestors themselves related their actions to their distrust of, and confusion around, the billing regime and disconnection threats of the Electric Corporation of Ghana (ECG). We show how narratives of the Krobo protests among the educated elite in Ghana relied on the discourse of unwillingness to pay and the entitlement of the poor; these narratives repeatedly carried by professional news sources downplayed the utility’s own heavy debts and cemented the blaming of the poor that is pervasive in elite-led energy policy analysis. They reflect Bourdieu’s claim that the media are themselves implicated in the symbolic violence of language control [42].

3. Following electricity and debt in Ghana

Ghana’s national grid has grown progressively over the last four decades. In 1989, only about 20 % of the population was connected to the national grid, but by 2021, it had grown to 85 % [43], making residential electricity a significant part of the industry’s cost and revenue stream [44].

At the same time as networked infrastructure services were expanding in Ghana, the World Bank and IMF, together with other donor partners, began aggressively pushing developing countries to accept Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). SAP pushed the Ghanaian government and others towards liberalization of their economies, full cost recovery from state-provided services, and lower government spending to reduce budget deficits; these conditionalities became pre-conditions for economic assistance. In Ghana, state-owned enterprises were diversified or privatized and public sectors were downsized [45–48]. While not all structural changes required by the World Bank went into effect, there was an overhaul of the Ghana energy pricing regime towards full cost recovery and economic efficiency.^{2,3}

One of the most frequent targets of the cost recovery regime within the electricity sector is “power loss” or electric power delivered that goes unpaid (via physical grid losses, unused power, unauthorized use, nonpayment, and billing problems). Power losses are common in national grid operations in many LMICs and were historically common in industrialized economies (see [50]). Today, Ghana’s electricity grid is thought to lose 30 % of power generated [43]. Most of this loss is at the distribution level, which ECG oversees, and which means that it cannot account for power it buys from the state-owned operation and transmission companies (the Ghana Grid Company Ltd. or GRIDCo and the Volta River Authority or the VRA). Historically, the government of Ghana paid off ECG’s debts to the VRA [51], but in recent years, ECG has been unable to pay monies owed to the VRA, GRIDCo and the IPPs. By August 2023, ECG was reported to owe the IPPs alone more than US\$ 2 billion [52]. Service providers whom the ECG cannot pay struggle with their own debts. For example, in 2019, VRA owed the Ghana Gas Company Limited over US\$ 735 million [53], in part because of the failure of ECG, GRIDCo, and other power consumers such as mining firms to pay their bills on time. These losses are significant in proportion to the electricity generated and distributed.

² During this period, the independent regulator Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC), responsible for setting tariffs, was established and began overseeing tariff increases [49].

³ Since 2000, the average electricity end-user tariffs in Ghana have grown at 19.1 % per annum, from 0.02 GHS per kWh in 2000 to 0.79 GHS per kWh in 2022, or 0.10 USD [43].

The serial debts within the power sector are only partly related to residential consumers. Between 2014 and 2016, a national power crisis saw the Ghanaian energy sector enter into exorbitant power-supply agreements with IPPs. As the power crisis turned debt crisis unfolded, Ghana sought a steady increase in loans and credits from the World Bank and IMF. In 2015, the IMF loaned the Ghanaian government \$198 million for a reform program which included, among other “main pillars,” efforts at “improving revenue collection” [54,55]. That same year, the World Bank approved an additional \$60 million in finance, specifically for ECG’s billing and collection system [56]. And by the following year, ECG was advertising plans to cut its distribution power losses by 30 % [57].

The ECG’s public pronouncements, however, emphasized its inability to collect monies owed by consumers; this source of lost revenue was regularly taken up in the national press. ECG has, however, recently threatened to shut off power to institutions such as the airport (45 million cedi owed [58]) and hospitals (GH cedi 261million owed [59]), and it did in fact cut off the Ghanaian Parliament for its 23-million-cedi unpaid bill [60,61]. In a blunt interview published in *Energy News Africa*, the (former) Minister of Power, Dr. Kwabena Donkor, stated that the “serious distress” in the energy sector could only be alleviated with an infusion of public financing; in addition to infrastructural inefficiencies and unviable tariff structure, he said, ECG cannot recover what is owed to them, “especially from the government” (emphasis added, [62]). The cedi’s fall against the dollar is also a major source of ECG’s “distress”: other than salaries, Dr. Donkor asserted, ECG’s payables are mainly dollar-denominated, while its receivables are cedi-denominated.

ECG argues that it can increase its revenues through digitization [52] and insists that prepaid (“smart”) meters are “the only option for the company to recover costs” [63]. With prepaid meters, ECG collects their monies from customers before they use the power – in effect, the users finance the company. However, numerous studies have shown long lags between the application for, and the receiving of, an electricity connection and prepaid meter [64–66], with many people paying extra for ‘connection men’ to ‘fast-track’ the connection [67, p. 4]. These delays and additional costs contribute to the persistence of illegal connections and associated losses in the energy value chain. Metering and tariff reforms can alleviate losses from only a small number of these conditions, and, as we show below, prepaid meters have not been able to resolve customer complaints of unreliability and payment problems.

The Krobo electricity protests of 2014–2022, and their interpretations in the press, provide insights into the complicated politics of electricity in Ghana. They show how debt articulated with broader grievances such that residents in the Krobo region and the state electricity distributor, the ECG, experienced a protracted dispute over payment for electricity and accumulated debt. They highlight the differences in how the protesting communities explain their protests and demands, and how many in the professional press explain and discuss them. Our argument does not support one version or the other per se. Rather, we show that these long-lasting disputes are complex, reactive to ongoing negotiations, responses to acknowledged billing grievances, and reflect deep power imbalances. However, the simple narratives presented to the public create a picture of rampaging youth who want to avoid paying for what they use by irrationally drawing on perceived injustices. We also show that, despite periodic acknowledgment by policy makers of legitimate grievances in Kroboland, the dominant discourses of the poor being unwilling to pay for basic services crowds out these expressions of sympathy. Prevailing consumer debt discourses are rarely contextualized within the larger reality of the utility’s debt burden.

We draw on data obtained through multiple methods: extensive content analysis of government documents and news articles on the Krobo electricity protests, review of digitized reports and news articles related to utility debt, and repeated interviews (between August 2017 and December 2022) with protest leaders and 15 local electricity users (sampled randomly) in Yilo Krobo and Lower Manya Krobo. These

interviews reflected how at least some protest leaders explained their billing grievances and refusals to pay. News publications — both printed and online — and television and radio interviews with officials of the ECG and the government of Ghana were used to understand how leading public figures framed, characterized, and reported the protests.

4. Payments and protests in Kroboland

In this section we sketch out a detailed chronology of the key protest years in the two Krobo municipalities. The timeline highlights the volatility of the dispute, contradictory assurances, shifting blame, and uneven media coverage.

4.1. 2014–2017: The billing dispute and early protests

In 2014, an estimated 70 % of ECG customers in the Yilo Krobo and Lower Manya Krobo Municipalities of the Krobo Enclave saw a sudden upsurge in their electricity bills (see Fig. 1). Between 2014 and 2016, customers regularly went to ECG's office at Somanya to complain about their abnormal bills. ECG officials were allegedly dismissive: As one local leader from a group that emerged during the dispute later recalled, "The ECG workers were very arrogant...When customers go there to complain that the bills were too much, they did not even take the bills to look at them."⁴ The standoff deepened as consumers questioned the legitimacy of their bills: "Our people refused to pay those high bills which in their opinion were abnormal. But they continue to pay the normal amount they used to pay."⁵

In May 2017, the United Krobo Foundation (UKF),⁶ a group formed during this period, led a protest to draw government and media attention to the overbilling and the debts that had followed [68]. The demonstration escalated, leading to the destruction of ECG's administrative building in Somanya [69,70]. UKF leaders submitted a petition to ECG and the President of Ghana expressing their billing grievances, calling for a formal investigation into irregular billing practices. In response, ECG established the Kofi Afewu Committee in June [71] and began a series of meetings with traditional authorities and representatives of youth-dominated groups.

Completed in 2018, the Kofi Afewu Committee report was never made public. However, an internal ECG document acknowledged that the committee had found "instances of over-billing, estimated bills and accumulated bills as well as challenges with ECGs customer care practices" [72], p. 5. The same report argued that "the billing errors were as a result of challenges encountered during the migration [to the new electronic billing system]" [72], p 5.

4.2. 2018–2021: Government response and escalation

About four years after the initial disputed bills, ECG promised to audit the community's 2014–2017 bills, and, in return, asked customers to resume payment of their current bills. Yet these audits were interrupted because of internal reorganizations and changes in service regime; meanwhile, protests intensified from 2019 onward, and with the earlier billing period still unresolved, new debts accumulated. Around this time, *Energy News Africa* quoted Energy Minister John-Peter Amewu saying that illegal connections were "draining the economy" [72]. The (then) General Manager of Public Relations for the ECG said that "power theft" was one of the company's major problems, resulting in about 15 % - 20 % of its losses.

In April 2019, Krobo residents blocked roads and burned tires over power outages (*dumsor*)⁷; the newspapers reported that "angry youth" resisted the firefighters [73,74]. A few days later, it was reported that 552 grievances had been filed in the Eastern Region (including Yilo Krobo) alleging wrong bills and wrongful shutoffs [75]; the report did not link ongoing protests to these utility errors. The next month, "irate youth" chased out utility officers, protesting mass disconnections in Lower Manya Krobo that were being carried out with the help of the Ghana Police Service [76]. Two days later, the utility had a message for Krobo: "We'll keep you in darkness until you demonstrate readiness to pay your bills" [77].

Media reports reminded readers that the protests had "turned bloody" almost two years earlier [78], and that Krobo residents claimed that the late Kwame Nkrumah had promised them free electricity because their lands had been taken for the Akosombo Dam [79]; none of our interviewees corroborated this. The clashes left one teenager onlooker, Thomas Partey, dead, believed to have been shot by the Ghanaian police [79]. The Eastern Regional Minister told Krobo residents to "go off the national grid" if they could not pay [80], arguing that they spuriously claimed entitlement to free electricity since the time of Nkrumah (a claim repeated by other media reports) [81]. Meanwhile, some politicians offered condolences and endorsed the right to protest [82].

After a quiet 2020 due to COVID-19, 2021 again brought tumultuous protests and renewed negotiations with near-daily media coverage of the Krobo impasse. In April 2021 the Minister for Energy convened a meeting of all sector agencies. Two solutions were proposed: i) ring-fence (set aside) the 2014 and 2017 debt while requiring payment of post-2018 bills; and ii) deploy prepayment metering in the area.

As prepaid metering efforts moved ahead without clear resolution, public frustration deepened. In April 2021, a reportedly 7000-strong "bellowing, chanting and drumming" crowd marched [83], demanding that power be supplied directly by the VRA rather than through ECG. News reports reminded readers ("...it would be recalled...") that, two years ago, these same protestors had set up roadblocks to impede ECG's work [83]. This time, protestors carried placards reading: *VRA where is our compensation and ECG move from Kroboland* [84,85]. The underlying grievances remained unresolved: allegations of overbilling not addressed, shootings uninvestigated, and victims uncompensated. Krobo leaders insisted: "Even if we have to buy electricity, we want to buy it directly from VRA...we cannot work with ECG anymore" [86]; and that there should be a halt to prepaid metering plans [85].

By the end of 2021, negotiations between the ECG, government authorities, and Krobo residents had reached a breaking point. The Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC) acknowledged that some bills had indeed been "outrageous" but proposed that residents begin paying their "genuinely outstanding bills" [87]; the UKF countered that electricity should be free or at least [our emphasis] provided by the VRA. Shortly thereafter, ECG cut power supply to the Krobo area, citing threats to worker safety [88], not restoring it for a week later and only after political pressure [89].

Tensions persisted. Allied Krobo youth groups maintained that the bills between 2018 and 2021 were still inaccurate because ECG had struggled to read meters, distribute bills, and track tenants who had moved homes [90]. They refused to pay the contested bills though some continued paying what they had before the upsurge. The groups warned of renewed demonstrations if the disputes remained unresolved.⁸ The ECG rejected their claims, the debts remained unpaid, and the stalemate deepened.

⁴ Interview with leadership of Krobo Youth Groups on 22.08.2017, Odumase Krobo

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The United Krobo Foundation is an advocacy group that emerged in 2017 to mobilize residents to protest billing anomalies. It was initially known as Voice of Krobo Force.

⁷ In Ghana, *dumsor* is a persistent, irregular, and unpredictable electric power outage.

⁸ Interview with UKF, 2021.

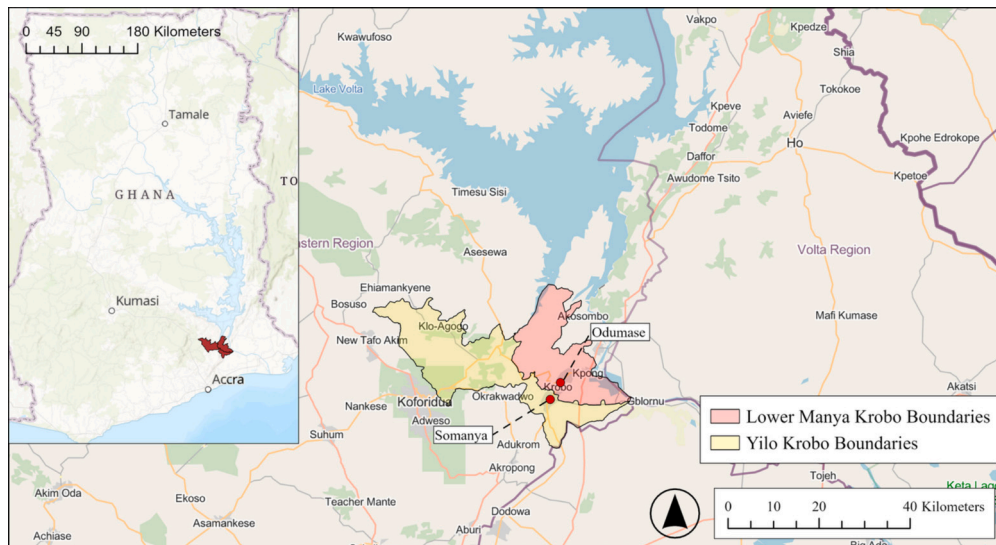


Fig. 1. Map showing the Lower Manya Krobo and Yilo Krobo municipal boundaries in Ghana's Eastern Region, with major towns (Odumase and Somanya) indicated. Inset map shows the study area's location relative to Ghana's capital, Accra, and major regional landmarks including Lake Volta. Sources: Ghana Open Data Initiative (2012); Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, and OpenStreetMap contributors (2025).

4.3. 2022: Prepaid meter conflict and militarization

In 2022, ECG finally announced its long-awaited ring-fencing decision through an official press release [91]. Under the plan, debts from 2014 to 2017 would be set aside, however, Kroboland was slated to “turn prepaid” [92]. Youth groups and community leaders cautiously welcomed the ring-fencing decision but expressed concern over the introduction of prepaid meters, fearing the meter itself could be used to recover disputed debts. Protest leaders and local opinion leaders argued that the volatile circumstances made the rollout unacceptable. Noting that bills from 2018 to 2021 had accumulated because ECG failed to serve bills on time and that many tenants had since relocated, they urged ECG to extend the ring-fencing through 2021 so all parties could start afresh [93].

Despite these objections, in May 2022 ECG began a mass rollout of prepaid meters across the two municipalities with the support of the Ghana Armed Forces and the police [91,94]. Later that month Parliament, acting under pressure from the MP of Lower Manya Krobo, ordered the withdrawal of soldiers, acknowledging that armed personnel were exacerbating tensions, though police remained [95]. The ECG Managing Director (MD) insisted that “[the] prepaid meter is the only option for the company to recover costs”, and told protestors: “I can't pay your electricity bills for you” [63].

August 2022 turned highly confrontational, with ECG staff boycotting work over safety concerns. The MD maintained that “the soldiers are also not going anywhere” [96]. The youth groups were intransigent, he alleged: “All they keep saying is to pardon their debt, withdraw the soldiers, and remove the prepaid meters” [96]. From July 27 to August 19 the two Krobo municipalities were plunged into a three-week blackout that paralyzed daily life, and shutting-off businesses, schools and hospitals. Power was eventually restored [97], but installations resumed under military escort. Residents detailed being beaten after refusing orders, and random beatings that left people “at a loss for words” [98].

As the conflict peaked, national media spotlighted the dispute. In an interview on the Hard Truth TV Talk Show on 9 August 2022, ECG Managing Director Mahama said the company was losing about 28 % annually and argued that electricity was: “not a right” but “a privilege,” adding, “It becomes a right when you are paying” [99]. He repeated the claim that Krobo residents sought exemption from payment as compensation for lands taken for the dams and stated that from 2014 to 2017 their total debt was roughly 168 million Ghana Cedis (21 million

USD). Around the same time, an hour-long *Point of View* program on CitiTV presented a timeline of the dispute, from marches against prepaid meters to the deployment of police and soldiers and residents' complaints over disconnections [100], while omitting mention of the finding of overcharging, the number of police deployed before Parliament's intervention, or ECG's insistence that the soldiers were “not going anywhere.”

One resident we interviewed alleged that ECG customers in the area were “protesting against ECG's abuse of monopoly, its use of the military to bulldoze its way with the introduction of prepaid meters, its insistence on customers to pay the debt emanating from 2018-2021 and its failure to serve customers with their current corrected bills.”⁹ These sentiments were commonly expressed by protest leaders, and national news occasionally highlighted ECG's aggressive intimidation tactics in the midst of numerous reports of protesting, marching, and abusing of ECG staff. Direct quotes from the UKF leadership – when these were reported – demanded the right to be well-treated given their historical sacrifices of land. Specifically, they demanded direct services from the VRA as they felt severely ill-treated by the ECG.

By mid-2022, the long-running dispute had reached a fragile resolution under heavy state oversight. It took the intervention of the National Security Ministry, the Inspector General of Police, and the traditional authorities of the two protesting municipalities to get the ECG to finally restore power. This was, however, based on the condition that all households were going to accept the prepaid meters as well as pay the debts from 2018 to 2022. The state summoned military officers to ensure that the prepaid meters were installed, otherwise the power was going to be shut off again [94]. Looking at the dire economic, health and security situation experienced during the almost-four-week 2022 power shutoff, and the continued presence of the armed militia, the communities acquiesced.

4.4. 2023-Onward: Aftermath

The shift to prepaid metering and digital payments has since introduced new complications for bill collection. Some customers who were willing to pay their bills found the e-payment system to be non-functional for weeks at a time when ECG insisted only on e-payments.

⁹ Interview, Somanya, 2.7.2022.

When, in 2023, a new set of postpaid customers raised alarms that their bills had been “wrong” for several months, ECG began a campaign to “fix the bill” so customers could “pay the bill” [101]. According to ECG’s communication manager, the hope was that ECG’s efforts will leave customers “happy enough to pay us what they owe us, especially for our postpaid customers who are holding on to a lot of our monies” [101]. Kroboland customers currently are buying power before they use it, as the prepaid meters self-disconnect whenever their credits get exhausted. Many are, however, still not paying the contested accumulated debts of 2018–2022.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have shown that an electricity power crisis, mounting debt and loans, new payment and policy regimes, and a surge of customer dissatisfaction—all common in the world of infrastructure and utility services—combined to create the conditions for the Krobo protests as well as for the contested accounts of both protests and protesters. While ECG has a history of running operations at a loss [51] and problems paying its legacy debt, the intensified focus on their revenue problems and mounting liabilities coincided with the 2014–2016 power crisis during which ECG’s debt skyrocketed. The reported ~30 % power loss (as of 2022) has been attributed to undelivered generation or excess generation [102], unpaid deliveries, inefficient generation and transmission losses [103]. Nonetheless the company, supported by many news reports, publicly blames consumer non-payment for its persistent power loss problems.

Adding to the critical literatures on debt-and-development, we have argued that Ghana’s “trickle-down debt” [6] means that the urgency of cost recovery could be related more to the utility’s need to pay down its legacy debt than to consumer (non)payment. The utility, like other sub-Saharan utilities, cannot use its increased tariffs mainly to improve services; it needs the finances for debt repayment. This gives credence to previous research that customers protest higher bills when they do not trust the utility to direct additional revenues towards better services, and when they do not believe that bills are being fairly collected and services fairly provided [1]. De-emphasizing the legacy debts also de-emphasizes the debt-triggered fiscal discipline imposed by the IMF and other lenders, and to the cycle of debt financing and structural adjustment that has been a hallmark of Africa’s integration into the global political economy [104]. The focus on consumer nonpayment naturalizes this “background” debt burden, treating it as an ahistorical and apolitical condition of contemporary development [5].

Drawing on the academic and journalistic literatures on consumer nonpayment, we have shown how consumers’ failure to pay their electricity bills is usually attributed to some combination of user entitlement, the idea that electricity is a right, and the general unwillingness to pay among the poor [41]. The poor are thus cast as non-paying, underserving, and troublesome people who make claims based on rights, and this image is common to water and electricity services well beyond Ghana [105]. These views were reflected in the extensive mainstream coverage of the Krobo protests and in ECG’s comments on their power losses and on installing prepaid metering for residential areas.

We have framed these conditions as reflecting a Bourdieusian system of symbolic violence, a system whereby practices that serve the subjective interests of particular classes and groups, appear to be objectively disinterested. Bourdieu argued that language, and the (elite) media by way of language control, were tools of symbolic violence [9,106]. Some discourses are selectively allowed to dominate news and analysis; others are kept in the background. The whole system is a “form of domination that works through concealing itself from its agents” [9], meaning that large sections of the population take its workings to be natural. Such naturalization has consequences; for instance, ECG has acknowledged that power theft accounts for ~20 % of its losses, but mainstream news outlets do not ask why the remaining losses, the other 80 %, are not

central to the goal of cost recovery. For over a decade, prepaid meters have been installed in regions with high power loss, supposedly due to “meter tampering, electricity theft, meter reading errors, and payment arrears” (see, for example, [107]). Prepaid metering as a strategy blames consumers for the utility’s financial problems while ignoring ECG’s own reports showing that the larger portion of the utility’s debt is not on account of consumer non-payment. Research within Ghana has found that churches, businesses, and middle-income households are also responsible for power losses [108], as are government agencies themselves. Yet the promotion of residential prepaid meters as the main way to stem power loss is backed in the professionalized media of many African countries [109].

The practice of blaming low-income consumers has shaped media accounts not only of electricity sector debts but of the Krobo protests themselves. One dimension of symbolic violence is the use of terms and norms of speech about subordinated classes that these classes do not use themselves [15]. Our analyses of TV programs, interview reports with various levels of officialdom, and public reports in the press, found stark differences between how the reasons for non-payment were reported by these sources and how the protest leaders themselves reported them. There was a clear tendency among the ECG staff and (English-language) news reporters to characterize the youth-led protests as irrational and entitled, despite the technical and non-technical problems with ECG’s billing system. From 2018 to 2022, the peak protest years, there were repeated allegations that the youth did not want to pay for their lights. The press frequently alleged that the youth (untruthfully) claimed that the loss of Krobo lands to two major dams had led then-president Nkrumah to promise them free electricity. None of the reports and claims asked: The Akosombo Dam started operating in 1965, so why did the Krobo youth wait until 2014 to protest their bills and claim their right not to pay? They had not taken to the streets before large billing anomalies appeared.

National media reports rarely quoted the youth leaders directly; when quoted directly, they appeared on “newer” media such as X (i.e. Twitter) videos as opposed to on “mainstream” newspapers and TV. (Twitter and TikTok are notably accessible to content providers beyond the professional journalist classes). In these direct quotes (and also in our interviews) protesters said they wanted the ECG out and the VRA to serve them directly (“*We are tired of ECG, we cannot work with them again*”), that prepaid metering in the presence of armed militia would not solve their problems, and that their communities should be treated better after the lands they had given up in order to make electricity for all of Ghana possible (“*Where is our compensation?*”) [110]. This is not to deny that at least some of the protesters were demanding free electricity, or that “compensation” implied free services in at least some cases, but the allegations that the protest leaders refused to pay outright always came from other sources.

Refusals to pay the post-2014 bills, the protracted nature of the protests, the anti-poor rhetoric of the media and elected officials (punctuated by periodic expressions of sympathy), and the age of the youth leaders all combined to shape how the protests themselves were covered in the national news. Many Krobo residents participated but the leadership was significantly in the hands of young adults. Media reports depicted violent and rampaging youth, with vivid first-person reports of how intimidating they were to the ECG and neutral third-person accounts of how they were intimidated by the militia. Talk shows on TV and the contrasting ways in which the youth were described versus how agency and government officials were described, taken over 2019–2022, clearly suggested irrational youth against cooler, wiser heads. The press carried regular reminders of past attacks and roadblocks from up to two years previous (*it would be recalled that...*); again, taken over 2019–2022, the reports hinted at near-continuous violence and physical disruptions to ECG’s work. The same reports citing the same officials were published, more or less verbatim, in multiple print venues as well as quoted on TV; this gave the official stories widespread influence and also gave the (false) impression of independent sources reporting similar news. The

repetition across outlets can be seen as a constitutive feature of the professional media; that near-identical reports circulate under different mastheads demonstrates how dominant narratives achieve the appearance of pluralism while reproducing the same frames. In Bourdieu's terms, this repetition is itself a form of doxic reinforcement, the normalization of a single interpretive logic across nominally diverse platforms.

Police violence and acknowledgments of ECG's billing errors did result in expressions of sympathy for the protesting communities from ruling and opposition parties. But the overall impression from the reporting was that of violent youth who could not listen to reason. Overall, the mainstream media (meaning, professionally-produced news, online news and TV rather than Twitter or TikTok) behaved in line with what was once called the "protest paradigm" [111,112]. This paradigm has framed accounts of protests in a wide range of countries (India, South Africa, Hong Kong, Brazil, USA, to name a few) and contends that student or youth protestors are often portrayed as delinquents, while police violence is framed as reactive and necessary to maintain order, though unfortunately occasionally getting out of hand [113]. Thus, the protests and grievances themselves are de-legitimized and street violence is emphasized [114]. While this paradigm has been contested as too simple, because the media itself contributes to power structures [115], and because news coverage is strategically exploited by many groups to different political and commercial ends [228], the coverage of the Krobo protests seems to corroborate the framing suggested by this decades-old paradigm. The implications of youth-led mass protests and their representation in the mainstream media in countries where young people make up a large share of the population remains under-explored.

6. Conclusion

Our content analysis of the professional media, the ECG report of 2018, and contradictory quotes from government officials and the Krobo protest youth leaders, taken together, suggest that a constellation of factors may have driven residents to protest ECG's bills: (i) the distrust of inaccurate bills / estimated bills, compounded by fears that prepaid meters would take into account these contested bills; (ii) the intimidating tactics of meter installation in the presence of armed personnel; (iii) the intimidating tactics of actual disconnections and threats of disconnection as retribution for not paying the disputed bills; (iv) the difficulty of payment as the utility transitioned to e-payments (only); and (v) resentment that the ECG was not treating Kroboland's customers fairly though their lands had been lost in order to produce ECG's electricity services. In this case, youth leaders were protesting higher tariffs that were not guaranteed to lead to better services.

We do not offer these arguments as a causal story about why the protests took place. We are making an interpretive argument about the political primacy of one set of explanations of tariff protests, accompanied by characterizations of the protestors that conform to those explanations, as against the relative marginalization of another set of characterizations and interpretations of those same protests. This marginalization is at the core of our symbolic violence framework; the implicitly class-based acceptance of the dominant discourse is at the core of our claim of misrecognition.

Drawing on Bourdieu's work on media, we have argued that the neglect of bigger utility debts allied to the coverage of the consumer debt protests is an instance of the agenda-setting power of symbolic violence. The frequent media allusions to the "demand" for free electricity and to the Krobo community's "refusal" to pay for what they consume cement a common narrative of the poor being unaccountable, and for being responsible for utilities' inability to recover costs or to pay their legacy debts. Such narratives are commonplace in professional media outlets in sub-Saharan Africa and in the academic literature on energy policy challenges in the global South. Simple accounts of complex contestations are unlikely to produce politically acceptable or economically

viable energy policies.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Veronica Jacome: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pius Siakwah:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Eric Tamatey Lawyer:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Isha Ray:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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