

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology  
Department 'Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia'

*Carola Lentz*

**Class and Power in a Stateless Society:  
revisiting Jack Goody's ethnography  
of the LoDagaa (Ghana)**

*Goody Lecture 2019*



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## Jack Goody (1919–2015)

Sir John Rankine Goody was brought up near London and initially studied English at Cambridge. Formative experiences during the Second World War led him to switch to social anthropology. He undertook fieldwork in Northern Ghana during the last decade of British colonial rule and taught anthropology at Cambridge University alongside Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach. After succeeding Fortes as William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology in 1973, he began to explore long-term historical contrasts between sub-Saharan African societies and those of Europe and Asia. Following V. Gordon Childe, Goody emphasized commonalities across the Eurasian landmass since the urban revolution of the Bronze Age. In numerous publications he highlighted developments in East Asia and criticised the eurocentric bias of Western historians and social theorists. Core themes include productive systems, the transmission of property and class inequality in global history; kinship, marriage and the “domestic domain”; technologies of communication, especially writing, the transmission of myth, and of knowledge generally; and consumption, including cuisine and flowers. These topics are not approached in isolation but in their interconnections. Ethnographic insights are essential, but they form just one component of Goody’s comparative vision. His best known works include *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (1962); *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (1971); *Production and Reproduction* (1976); *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977); *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983); *The Oriental, The Ancient and the Primitive* (1990); *The East in the West* (1996); *The Theft of History* (2006); *Renaissances: the one or the many?* (2010); *The Eurasian Miracle* (2010); *Metals, Culture and Capitalism: an essay on the origins of the modern world* (2012).

Goody’s agenda is one which the Department ‘Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia’ at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology seeks to continue. In an annual lecture series, a distinguished scholar addresses pertinent themes for anthropology and related fields:

**Goody Lecture 2011:** Keith Hart, “Jack Goody’s Vision of World History and African Development Today”.

**Goody Lecture 2012:** Peter Burke, “A Case of Cultural Hybridity: the European Renaissance”.

**Goody Lecture 2013:** Martha Mundy, “The Solace of the Past in the Unspeakable Present: the historical anthropology of the ‘Near East’”.

**Goody Lecture 2014:** Francesca Bray, “Rice as Self: food, history and nation-building in Japan and Malaysia”.

**Goody Lecture 2015:** David Wengrow, “Cities before the State in Early Eurasia”.

**Goody Lecture 2016:** Martine Segalen, “On *Papies* and *Mammies*: the invention of a new relative in contemporary European kinship”.

**Goody Lecture 2017:** Nur Yalman, “On Cultural Revolutions: observations on myth and history in Turkey”.

**Goody Lecture 2018:** Sylvia Yanagisako, “Accumulating Family Values”.

The ninth Goody Lecture was given by Carola Lentz on 13th June 2019.

*Carola Lentz*

**Class and Power in a Stateless Society:  
revisiting Jack Goody's ethnography  
of the LoDagaa (Ghana)**

Jack Goody was born in July 1919, almost exactly one hundred years ago, and I feel privileged to have been invited to deliver the ninth Goody lecture. The invitation has given me an opportunity to reread Goody's ethnography of the people he referred to as the LoDagaa. With his portrayals of the LoDagaa, based on fieldwork in the 1950s in the Lawra District in what is today Ghana's Upper West Region, Goody made a lasting contribution to anthropology. He modelled them as a classical example of an acephalous society, marked by the absence of ethnic boundaries, political power and social class. I read Goody's ethnography at the beginning of my fieldwork in the late 1980s, but subsequently concentrated on my own research. It has been fascinating to revisit his writings after having worked in and published on Northern Ghana myself for over thirty years. Unlike Goody, I have not become a sociologist engaged in global comparison nor a historian of the world. Despite strong interest in comparative analysis, I have remained an Africanist.<sup>1</sup> I have continued to do fieldwork in West Africa, and particularly Lawra District, in recent decades, and this fact perhaps accounts for some of the differences between my perspectives on the LoDagaa or Dagara, as they usually call themselves, and those of Goody.

Goody was a towering figure in my early fieldwork among the Dagara and their neighbours. Before I went to Northern Ghana for the first time in 1987, I had done several years of research in Ecuador and could boast a PhD as well as a short list of publications. This helped me not to feel too intimidated. But Goody certainly was a presence in my new field, despite the fact that three decades had passed since his fieldwork. Many people in Lawra District – not

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<sup>1</sup> Whether Goody can be classified as an 'Africanist' is moot: see below and, for example, Goody 1991: 45; Hart 2011: 23; Lobnibe 2018: 19.

only secondary school and university graduates but also illiterate elderly villagers – had heard about him, even if they had not known him personally. To a significant extent, he had shaped the image of the European anthropologist with which I had to come to terms.

Most of my educated interlocutors had not actually read his ethnographies. They had at most browsed through short excerpts. However, they often held strong opinions about Goody's work, on the basis of what others said he had supposedly written. The Dagara are an outspoken people, reluctant to acknowledge any authority – a legacy of their tradition of statelessness. They had no qualms about attacking squarely what they felt was a misrepresentation of their society. Goody's account of their ethnic names and lack of ethnic unity attracted particularly sharp criticism, as did, at least in some quarters, his insistence on the absence of pre-colonial chiefly or other political office. On the other hand, there was widespread admiration for his detailed account of the kinship system, funerary practices, inheritance rules and local beliefs. Tales circulated about his impressive linguistic skills.<sup>2</sup> He was commonly thought to have been initiated into the Bagre, the most important local secret society on which he published extensively, often in collaboration with his Dagara friend S.W.D.K. (Kum) Gandah. As a matter of fact, Goody was not initiated and stated so clearly in his writings.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless local belief to the contrary was tenacious. More generally, I noted that for many Dagara intellectuals as well as ordinary villagers Goody served as a point of reference – no matter whether positive or negative.

When Goody undertook his fieldwork among the LoDagaa in the early 1950s, Ghana's Northwest was still part of the colonial protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. There were no institutions of secondary education in the region. The local elite consisted of middle-school graduates employed as teachers or administrative clerks. It was very small. It was only after Ghana achieved independence in 1957 that senior high school and tertiary education became more accessible for Northerners. The number of graduates from Ghanaian

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<sup>2</sup> Confirmation of Goody's command of the Dagara language was provided by Isidore Lobnibe, himself a Dagara and an anthropologist, who interviewed Goody in 2006 (Lobnibe 2018: 4).

<sup>3</sup> Goody's explanation of his research methodology in the introduction to *The myth of the Bagre* (1972) leaves no doubt that he relied on accounts of initiates who were willing to talk; later he used texts recorded on a tape-recorder that his friend Kum had smuggled into the Bagre room; see Goody and Gandah 2002: xiii–xiv.

or European and North American universities, for which some Dagara students gained scholarships, rose steadily. Scholars were also trained at the Catholic seminary in Tamale. The Northwest had been missionized by the White Fathers since 1929. From the mid-1930s onwards the Catholic church operated a number of primary, middle and later also senior high schools parallel to the schools established by the colonial and later the independent government. School enrolment thus increased considerably. Dagara university graduates and Catholic seminarians started conducting research on their own culture and society in the mid-1970s. They produced an impressive number of Bachelor, Master and PhD theses on the local language, settlement history, kinship systems, political organisation, traditional religion, Christianisation, and Dagara worldviews.<sup>4</sup> By the 1980s, therefore, European scholars were increasingly challenged by local intellectuals. The former were obliged to conduct research ‘with’ rather than merely ‘on’ the Dagara. They had to submit their findings to local scrutiny – an experience that Goody did not make, but which has been part and parcel of my own work.

I believe I was the first European to undertake in-depth and long-term fieldwork in this particular corner of West Africa ‘after Goody’.<sup>5</sup> That I came to do research among the Dagara and continued to do so for over three decades was more or less an accident. Despite holding a PhD in sociology and having worked on South America, I was offered a lectureship in social anthropology at the Free University of Berlin in 1987 and charged to organise student fieldwork projects in Africa. I decided to go to Ghana. Searching for contacts with Ghanaian scholars for my first reconnaissance trip, a colleague put me in touch with Sebastian Bemile, a linguist then teaching at the University of Ghana, who happened to be a Dagara. In the summer of 1987, I travelled through the entire

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of Anglophone PhD theses are Angsotinge 1986; Bekye 1991; Bemile 1985; Der 1983; Dery 1987; Kpiebaya 1991; Kuuire 1972; Naameh 1986; Tengan 2000 and Yelapaala 1983 – to quote just a few. Francophone scholarship from Dagara scholars of Burkina Faso is equally proliferous. If one adds pre-doctoral dissertations, as well as occasional papers and articles published by secondary school teachers, the amount of literature produced by Dagara on Dagara culture and society is impressive. For an analysis of an inner-Dagara debate on chieftaincy versus acephalousness, see Lentz 2003; for a critical assessment of Dagara scholars’ ‘rewriting the past’, see Hawkins 2002: esp. 107–162.

<sup>5</sup> The Italian anthropologist Fabrizio Sabelli did a stint of research in the small border town of Hamile in the early 1970s and wrote a rather romantic book on the Dagara as a prime example of an anti-capitalist community (Sabelli 1986). However, perhaps due to the fact that this work was published in French, nobody ever mentioned its author during my first visits to Hamile in the 1980s, whereas Goody was a well-known figure.

country and visited Sebastian's parents in Hamile. The week that I spent in Sebastian's home village ended with my adoption into his extended family and my decision to do fieldwork among the Dagara.<sup>6</sup>

Before going to Hamile, I had not heard about the Dagara or read Goody's ethnographies. Of course, when I went back to Germany and then travelled to Ghana many times afterwards, I read Goody's two major ethnographies on the LoDagaa (Goody 1956, 1962) and most of his articles on the area. However, I had no intention of revisiting his fieldwork. Rather, my aim was to conduct a study of labour migration to the yam plantations and gold mines of Southern Ghana and on changes this was bringing about in Dagara families. This soon expanded into an interest in exploring the intricate historical processes of creating ethnic identities, in both urban and rural locations, and studying the role of educated elites in new constructions of Dagara culture. Later themes included the history of chieftaincy, land rights and settlement narratives, cultural festivals, the emergence of an educated middle class, and a good deal more besides.

In this lecture I shall discuss how my research among the Dagara has developed and the perspectives this may offer – retrospectively – on Goody's ethnography. However, I shall begin by exploring an irritation that has never quite left me with respect to Goody's work. It concerns his peculiar lack of interest in the local history and contemporary politics of the LoDagaa. This flies in the face of his later explorations of the history of the Gonja of Northern Ghana and his attraction to sweeping historical (and sociological) comparison worldwide, between Europe and Asia, and between Eurasia and Africa. After discussing Goody's 'presentist' account of the LoDagaa, I shall elaborate on how his work has provided inspiration, but also provoked dissent, in three fields of my own enquiries – the history of chieftaincy, the emergence of a middle class, and the creation of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries. To a certain extent, the differences between my ethnography and that of Goody reflect the deep social and political transformations of Dagara society that took place in the decades between the end of his fieldwork and the beginning of my own. However, I shall suggest in the conclusion that the differences also arise out of distinct ways of conducting fieldwork and different theoretical interests.

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<sup>6</sup> For narratives of members of the extended Bemile family about my 'adoption', see Bemile 2019; Lobnibe 2019 and Meda 2019.

## *Ethnography and History*

Many of Goody's texts, particularly *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (1962), have been inspiring for my own work. I am sympathetic to his materialist perspective and agree with the importance he attaches to property relations and the intergenerational transmission of rights. His finely-grained analyses of the Dagara kinship system and marriage payments, with their redistributive effects, are as authoritative as his explorations of Dagara funerary customs and ritual practice more generally. His work on the oral transmission of knowledge and the Bagre narrative (Goody 1978) and his reflections on the 'interface between the written and the oral' (Goody 1987) have been highly relevant to my research into the oral history of the Dagara and neighbouring groups.

At the same time, I remain irritated by the young ethnographer's apparent lack of scholarly interest in the radical social and political transformations of the society he studied – both fundamental transformations since 1900 in the wake of the LoDagaa's incorporation into the colonial polity and more recent upheavals in the wake of decolonisation that happened right under his eyes. Goody conducted altogether twenty months of fieldwork among the Dagara, mainly in three villages: among the 'LoWiili' in Birifu, a village near Lawra (Goody 1956), and among the 'LoDagaba' in Tom and Ko, two adjacent settlements in the paramount chiefdom of Nandom (Goody 1962). Birifu was the seat of a head chief into whose house the anthropologist was incorporated. In the early 1950s, the village lived through a period of acute conflict with the paramount chief of Lawra. Tom and Ko had been more thoroughly Christianised but their literate elites were just as deeply involved in party-political struggles as the residents of Birifu.<sup>7</sup>

In the first chapter of his monograph on Birifu, Goody indeed acknowledges that a "series of fundamental changes spring from the initial fact of European rule," but then promptly asserts that "these have only begun to impinge upon the social life of the inhabitants" (1956: 14). He maintains that widespread

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<sup>7</sup> On Goody's interlocutors, see also his explanations in an interview with Isidore Lobnibe (Lobnibe 2018: 7–11).



labour migration “had comparatively little effect as yet on the organized social life of the community” (1956: 10). He concedes that the British had imposed “a hierarchy of chiefs (...) upon the previous system” since the beginning of the century – a “factor militating against a strictly synchronic study”. Even so, Goody claims, it “is still possible to disentangle the one from the other”, that is: the indigenous political organisation from the colonial institutions. Hence his deliberate choice “to consider the political organization as it existed at the beginning of the century” (1956: iv).

Such statements – and the abstention from history that they justify – are not surprising. Goody’s work of that period is consistent with the structuralist-functional school of the day. His resolutely presentist or even timeless ethnographic writing was the standard procedure of the anthropological scholar (Hart 1985: 244–248). I still wonder why Goody hardly mentioned the political disruptions and social change taking place during the very years of his fieldwork. It would be fascinating to consult his field diaries and find out whether they contain notes on, for instance, party politics and chieftaincy affairs that his educated interlocutors, as well as labour migrants and others, must have been discussing at the time. Goody himself later mentions that national politics did penetrate the social fabric of the villages. He himself joined Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party (Goody 1982: 17–18), observed the emergence of a new literate elite (Goody 1987: 139–147) and witnessed the increasing pressure which the chiefs felt when a new local constitution featuring elected councils was introduced (Goody 1975: 98–99). However, in the 1950s his principal goal was to carry out research about the social organisation of a traditionally stateless society and to disentangle the complex regulations of inheritance. With hindsight, it is intriguing to think how much ‘abstraction’ from some of his interlocutors’ ongoing concerns the anthropologist’s scholarly focus must have required.

Goody wrote his first report on the Northwest, *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast* (1954), published by the Colonial Office, in his capacity as a sociological research officer of the Gold Coast government. The report includes a brief, but rather conjectural history of population movements before the onset of colonial rule. These passages provide an uncritical summary of what some district commissioners and earlier government anthropologists had already written up. In any case, these historical reconstructions had no consequences for Goody’s account of the synchronic functioning

of local society. Similarly, his observations on the absence of clear-cut ethnic boundaries and his discussion of local self-designations (Goody 1954: 23–25; Goody 1956: 16–26) – which I will turn to in more detail below – largely follow the arguments of colonial officials, who had been frustrated by the absence of orderly ‘tribes’ in the Northwest.

Goody’s celebrated monograph on LoDagaa funerals and property relations, based mainly on fieldwork in Birifu, but also Tom and Ko, greatly widened the scope of sociological comparison, while remaining basically disinterested in questions of historical change (Goody 1962). In the introduction, Goody states that although “evidence concerning changes in the past is not lacking (indeed the process of change still goes on)”, he does “not intend to present such material here,” not least because “the social systems” have to be “analysed beforehand” (Goody 1962: 9). That is: before discussing history, an ideal-typical model of a particular cultural institution needs to be established. Goody never mentions that by the time of his research the majority of the population of Tom, Ko and Nandom had become Catholic.<sup>8</sup> Yet this development certainly had a significant impact on marriage practices, property relations and funerals (Hawkins 2002: 227–276; Lentz 2006: 166–171).

Goody later wrote some rather self-critical articles about the structural-functionalist “‘If the Government Agents hadn’t been there’ approach to the present” (Goody 1990: 1). In a memoir of his own intellectual development (Goody 1991; more or less reprinted in Goody 1995: 118–143), he claims that when he conducted fieldwork in the context of decolonisation, he was aware that the “new Africa was also demanding a history” (Goody 1991: 46). He notes that

earlier anthropologists had often steered away from historical considerations, partly because of the rash speculations of their predecessors about the past, partly because of an alternative methodological approach associated with fieldwork, and partly for the practical reason that archives and records were officially closed for a 50-year period (ibid.: 46–47).

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<sup>8</sup> Goody did eventually write an insightful article on the question of Christian ‘conversion’ among the LoDagaa and others (Goody 1975). But he did not consider the influence that this might have had on marriage, inheritance and funerals.

He notes that “the situation had changed in many respects” in the 1950s and particularly the 1960s (*ibid.*: 47). This implies that he sees himself as belonging to a new generation of fieldworkers, which was more interested than predecessors had been in history and contemporary politics. However, this is somewhat misleading. Goody did write a few papers on Ghanaian politics and contemporary conflict in Northern Ghana (1968, 1980, and 1982), including a perceptive analysis of how national party-political competition interlocked with local lines of conflict (1982: 14–21). He also published a number of short papers on the pre-colonial history of Northern Ghana (1977, 1990, and 1998). However, these articles focus on the Tallensi in Ghana’s Northeast, following up on Meyer Fortes’ study, and only briefly touch on the Northwest.<sup>9</sup>

After studying the LoDagaa, Goody turned his interest to the Gonja where he conducted fieldwork in the 1960s, together with his wife Esther Newcomb Goody. This research is much more attentive to historical questions, perhaps due to a shift in his own interest, notably to the question as to why social stratification worked out so differently in Africa when compared with Europe. Perhaps, however, his Gonja interlocutors’ interest in history was so imperative that he could not ignore it. He became interested particularly in conflicts about succession to high office and the role of literacy in remembering the kingdom’s history. In an insightful article on oral tradition and mnemonic devices among the LoDagaa and the Gonja, he states that among the first, “knowledge of their past, actual or imaginary, was very limited” (Goody 1978: 288) while among the latter “the history of the kingdom was a perpetual topic of conversation” (*ibid.*: 291).

Goody never applied his newly awakened historical interest to his former field site in Lawra District. He continued believing that the introduction of chieftaincy, the Catholic mission with its phenomenally high conversion rates, and rampant labour migration had not produced any significant changes in the

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<sup>9</sup> These historical articles take the form of occasional papers which present interesting ideas, but are careless in referencing the colonial documents that were consulted (the archives and document signatures are not properly quoted). There are also some factual mistakes which show that Goody may not have been entirely familiar with the colonial history of Ghana’s Northwest. These writings ignore – or at least never quote – the historical studies of his own students, as well as work by myself and other scholars which had been published by then. Goody’s article on the Tallensi (1990), for instance, largely follows Keith Hart’s study of Tallensi social history (1978), but does not acknowledge this. My impression is that he piled up copies of articles and colonial documents in his office in Cambridge, but never got around to an adequate classification.

fabric of local relations at the time of his fieldwork. When I met him personally for the first time in 1990, as well as during later encounters, he did not seem overly interested in hearing about my discoveries concerning local history, nor did he enjoy conversing about what it was like to do fieldwork in the 1950s. His memoir appeared a year after our first meeting (Goody 1991). This included reminiscences of his work among the LoDagaa. Perhaps he felt he had said all he wanted to say. This was, of course, perfectly legitimate for a scholar in his seventies who had gone on to explore many new themes. Still, it was somewhat frustrating for me, then a thirty-six-year-old researcher with high hopes of gaining further insight from the pioneer ethnographer, beyond what he had published.

If Goody was not an aficionado of micro-history, at least not in his old fieldwork site among the LoDagaa, it is worth considering the implications of this limitation for his later contributions to macro-history. He challenged the conventional distinctions between Europe and Asia, with Africa providing the big ‘Other’, a social system without classes, surplus production, dowry and so forth, in short: a type of society which differed fundamentally from Europe and Asia. Goody never abandoned his basic distinction between Eurasia and Africa, based on economy and technology (Hann 2017: 474). He remained disinterested in the “messy business of politics”, as Chris Hann put it (*ibid.*: 473). As Keith Hart (2011: 23) concluded, Africa for Goody became “a static abstraction”, symbolised by “the lifestyle of the stateless hoe-farmers he knew” – an abstraction which he used “to support his assault on Western disparagement of Asia”.

### *The History of Chieftaincy*

My fieldwork among the Dagara in the Nandom paramount chiefdom to which Ko and Tom belonged began in conflict-ridden times. In the late 1980s there were massive struggles over chieftaincy succession in Nandom and ethnic tensions vis-à-vis the neighbouring Sisala of Lambussie. These chieftaincy conflicts and ethnic troubles were intimately connected with Ghana’s national politics of decentralisation and the delimitation of new administrative districts. After the re-legalisation of political parties in 1992, these conflicts also con-

nected again with party-political competition, fuelling fault lines that dated back to the 1950s. Since claims were always legitimated by invocations of history, the ethnographer hardly had an alternative but to attend to the various competing histories which the political protagonists mobilized.

In accordance with my plan to investigate labour migration to the gold mines, I carried out research in the mines as well as the home villages of many miners. But I also studied the regional and local history much more intensely than I had intended. I explored the origins of colonial chieftaincy and ethnic categories, the dynamics of decolonisation and many related aspects of the local social, economic and political history, taking the story up to the ethno-political mobilisation of the 1980s and 1990s (Lentz 1998, 2006). I participated in many meetings of Youth and Development Associations and interviewed members of the local political elite. I also spent many months in the colonial archives, in Tamale, Accra, London and Oxford as well as in Ouagadougou, Aix-en-Provence and the missionary archives of the White Fathers in Rome.

In the late 1990s, I began a new large teamwork project focussed on settlement histories and land rights (Lentz 2013). Our aim was to trace the Black Volta region's pre-colonial history as well as colonial and post-colonial transformations of property rights, ritual territories, and the role of ethnic and local belonging. In the course of dozens of interviews and conversations that I conducted with village elders, I learned about the role of the shrine custodians in land conflicts and embittered struggles over land resources in the late nineteenth century. This led me to revise some of Goody's claims about earth shrines and the alleged abundance of land. The evidence that I collected contradicted the model of an originally egalitarian society. I found that the colonial institution of chieftaincy was grafted on to pre-colonial power hierarchies and strategies of primitive accumulation which then deepened under colonial rule.

Goody's early analysis of the pre-colonial political order of the Dagara centred on the claim that "there was a relative absence of formal leadership" and an "evident lack of delegated or imposed authority" (Goody 1956: 113). The only office holders, Goody argued, were the custodians of the earth shrine. These shrines are sanctuaries that consist of a stone or earthenware pot. They were usually established by the first-comers to an area. The shrine custodians had to carry out regular sacrifices in order to pacify the earth deities believed to be

the original spiritual owners of the land. According to Goody, the office they held was spiritual in nature. At the same time, however, he describes the area under the influence of a particular earth shrine as a territorial unit whose inhabitants constituted the basic political unit of the LoDagaa. "Within its confines homicide necessitates the performance of expiatory sacrifices (...). Outside its boundaries, armed self-help constitutes the main procedure for the settlement of disputes among clans" (Goody 1956: 111). Along the lines established by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard in their *African Political Systems* (1940), Goody examines how even a stateless society can contain violence. This interest in 'conflict studies', Goody later commented, was motivated not least by his personal experience of war and by having spent several years in a prisoner-of-war camp (Goody 1991: 48). In his 1956 monograph on the LoWiili, but more explicitly in an article published a year later (Goody 1957), Goody shows how the obligations associated with membership in supra-local patrilineal clans and the taboos of blood-shedding in the local earth-shrine parishes worked together to curb the recourse to violence. He concludes: "Despite the lack of constituted authority before the arrival of the Europeans, the society was so organised as to make possible the peaceful co-operation which agriculture demands" (Goody 1956: 114).<sup>10</sup>

In one of his later articles on the political system of the Tallensi, Goody adds a revealing footnote in which he concedes that there may have been more violence in pre-colonial times than he has claimed in his ethnography. Evidence of freebooters, slave-raiders and feuds found in early colonial reports "qualifies the overly peaceful view of the equilibrium of pre-colonial life which some of us found in the later period" (Goody 1990: 25, fn. 36). Goody does not take this any further, but this observation confirms what I have learned from both the archives and interviews with village elders. In an insightful article on 'self-help', feud and negotiation in African stateless societies during the colonial period, Gerd Spittler (1980) has convincingly argued that the "shadow of the Leviathan", that is: the presence of the colonial state, albeit distant, had an important impact on the contours of local conflict. Occasional punitive expeditions and the knowledge that contestants could turn to, or be summoned by, the colonial officers promoted peaceful means of negotiating conflict. Spittler's argument

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<sup>10</sup> His findings concur with Evans-Pritchard's analysis of 'ordered anarchy' and 'segmentary opposition' among the Nuer, although for some reason Goody never quotes this earlier ethnography.

implies that, in the complete absence of such state structures, local mechanisms for curbing violence might have been much less effective. The colonial archives are indeed full of reports of violent conflicts before or shortly after the arrival of British and French officers – conflicts within lineages, patrilines and villages as well as between neighbouring villages, but also across ethnic and linguistic boundaries (for examples, see Lentz 2013, esp. chap. 1). The latter conflicts, particularly those between Dagara and Sisala frontiersmen, hardened boundaries and created a sense of ethnic difference even in pre-colonial times.

‘Strong men’, as my interlocutors often called them, and freebooters undoubtedly existed in a number of villages. Some of these powerful war leaders or influential traders owned slaves and played a role in the late nineteenth-century slave trade. However, they did not (yet) create a political office that could be compared to institutionalised chieftaincy. I fully concur with Goody concerning the pre-colonial absence of chiefs, in the strict sense of the term, among the Dagara and to a lesser degree among the Sisala. I found that the Dagara themselves, however, were, and continue to be, somewhat divided concerning their society’s pre-colonial political order. Quite a few of my interlocutors insisted that their people had already developed a complex system of chieftaincy, with various hierarchical layers, before the onset of colonial rule. The interests at stake were obvious: paramount chiefs and their followers wanted to boost their legitimacy by invoking the pre-colonial origins of their office. In addition, Dagara not immediately connected to chiefly families sought to counter the implicit stigmatisation of being a stateless and hence, in the eyes of most Ghanaians, uncivilised society. Others, however, insisted that chieftaincy was a ‘White man’s affair’ and were proud of the original democratic traditions of the Dagara (Lentz 2003).

In any case, by the time Goody conducted his research in the 1950s colonial chieftaincy had become a deeply entrenched reality. Chieftaincy was established through a long process of trial and error and productive misunderstandings between colonial and African actors. It was built on pre-colonial power inequalities. In some places, the colonial officers ratified the influence of ‘strong men’ by appointing them as chiefs. Elsewhere, the earth-priestly family delegated a village spokesperson, who then became chief. From the 1930s the new institution was further formalised by establishing a hierarchy of paramount and divisional chiefs and village headmen (Lentz 2006, 2018). Chieftaincy cer-

tainly contributed to the control of local violence. It affected daily life and even settlement patterns, because ‘exit’ strategies (migrating to villages or bush settlements outside the reach of a particular chief) were always an option to avoid overly exploitative office holders. There were limits to chiefly despotism, not only because people threatened to move away, but also because they could refuse to obey the chiefs’ demands for ‘free’ labour (for examples, see Goody 1956: 14; Lentz 2006: 41–43, 55–56, 157–159). If chiefs were notoriously unable to recruit such labour for maintaining roads and other duties, their lack of authority became obvious to the British, and led to their replacement by other aspirants to chiefly office.

Despite many incidences of resistance, chieftaincy became an important avenue for primitive accumulation through the extraction of tribute, as Goody notes (1956: 110), quoting a colonial officer’s report on the Lawra District. This report formed part of an intense debate in the 1930s among the British administrators about the future of the indigenous political order in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Most colonial officials wanted to stabilise the institution of chieftaincy, but some proposed a return to the original political constitution and wanted to make the earth-shrine custodians the cornerstone of a reformed colonial order (Lentz 1999). In the end, the supporters of chieftaincy prevailed. By the 1950s, abolition of this institution no longer seemed an option. Even in the wake of decolonisation and after independence, the local population agreed that ‘chieftaincy has come to stay.’ It offered a measure of representation within the new state structures, and it put the stateless Dagara finally on a par with the traditional kingdoms, which had always looked down on their stateless neighbours’ supposed anarchy.

After the death of the influential and wealthy Birifu Naa in 1950 (whose family had been Goody’s hosts), that community entered a period of intense conflict over chiefly succession. There was also an embittered struggle over whether the Birifu sub-divisional chiefdom should continue as a subordinate component of the paramount chiefdom of neighbouring Lawra or become independent (Lentz 2006: 185–187). These conflicts became quickly entwined with national and regional party politics. One of Goody’s local friends was Abeyifaa Karbo, a member of the powerful chiefly family of Lawra, a middle-school



teacher, astute politician, and later influential paramount chief himself.<sup>11</sup> Karbo was a clear example of how chiefly power and modern education were fused in order to build new political and economic careers (Lentz 2006: 200–209). Kumbonoh Gandah, who was later to become Goody's collaborator in the collection of material on the Bagre cult, was another example of such careers that merged resources connected to chieftaincy, school education and engagement in the new political parties. Kumbonoh was a member of the wealthy Birifu chiefly family. He used some of his inheritance to build up a profitable trading and transport enterprise. At the same time, he was highly literate and deployed these skills as the secretary of a party leader (Gandah 2004). Unlike the majority of the Birifu Naa's family members, who sided with Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, however, Kumbonoh belonged to the same oppositional party as Abeyifaa Karbo.<sup>12</sup>

Through his friendships with Karbo, Gandah and other educated Dagara (Lobnibe 2018: 8–11), Goody must have been fully aware of ongoing local political struggles and their entanglement with regional and national politics. However, he does not seem to have reflected on how these contemporary conflicts might have coloured people's reports about their traditional political system. Only after engaging with the Gonja, where his interlocutors' interest in chieftaincy was inescapable, did he venture some brief remarks on chieftaincy in Lawra District in the 1950s. He notes that the new local constitution established by the colonial government in 1950, which introduced elected councils, put some pressure on chiefs and headmen. They were afraid that their former subjects, once elected as councillors, would take vengeance for the chiefs' past 'sins' of seizing cattle and appropriating unpaid labour. In response to their fears, the chiefs took recourse to a new cult, the Na-angminle ('the little god'), which placed a ban on theft but also offered protection against such criticism and attack (Goody 1975: 98–99). Goody's short description of this cult makes one curious what hidden treasures his field diaries on Lawra, Birifu and Tom

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<sup>11</sup> In his interview with Isidore Lobnibe (2018: 8–9), Goody speaks about his relations with one Kunyamwinibini, but this must have been precisely the man who later came to be known as Abeyifaa Karbo.

<sup>12</sup> Goody edited and published Kumbonoh Gandah's autobiography (Gandah 2004; see also Lentz 2008), but was not quite as interested in editing Gandah's manuscript on his chiefly father and the history of chieftaincy in Birifu; this was a task that I eventually undertook myself (Lentz 2009a, 2012).

may still contain. They might well offer invaluable insights into the politics of chieftaincy during the 1950s, an indispensable element in writing a local history of decolonisation.

### *The Emergence of a Middle Class*

As a result of my intense interaction not only with villagers but also educated ‘elites’ – as the older generation of upwardly mobile men liked to call themselves (Lentz 1994; Behrends and Lentz 2012) – I came to address the emergence of a middle class among the Dagara. I have been particularly interested in the biographies of senior high school and university educated Dagara men, tracing their changing life trajectories over several generations. I have also looked at how such social mobility results in the creation of what I call ‘multi-class’ extended families.<sup>13</sup> More generally, I explore the consolidation of social stratification among people who used to constitute a quite different, more egalitarian society.

As Keith Hart has pointed out, Jack Goody has been, for almost half a century, “the leading protagonist” of “an ‘anthropology of unequal society’” (Hart 2011: 9). His analyses of the connections between productive systems, the intergenerational transmission of property and the emergence of class inequality have been most inspiring for my own work. Goody’s interest in these themes, however, was mainly directed at world-wide comparisons in a very *longue durée* focussed “on pre-industrial societies in Europe, Asia and Africa” (Hart 2011: 5). He was less interested in analysing the micro-dynamics of inequality in contemporary Africa. For Goody, Africa – the LoDagaa writ large – became the prime instance of classless societies. He located the reasons for the continent’s fundamental difference from stratified Eurasian societies primarily in distinct demographic conditions, the technologies and conditions of agricultural production – the hoe versus the plough, land abundance versus land scarcity, subsistence farming versus creation of a surplus – and the associated property and kinship regimes (Goody 1971). In Keith Hart’s words:

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<sup>13</sup> On the particular challenges of middle-class research in Africa in general, see Lentz 2015 (on multi-class families *ibid.*: 43–44).

Sub-Saharan Africa (...) largely missed out on this urban revolution [in the Mediterranean and Asia, C.L.] along with its agricultural technology, higher population density and unequal property relations. This is why traditional African forms of kinship and marriage are so distinctive and their societies were, relatively speaking, classless. Even where a measure of stratification existed, redistribution through kinship institutions prevented the emergence of classes with different styles of consumption. (Hart 2011: 12)

Goody's observations on the absence of social stratification and institutionalised political power among the pre-colonial LoDagaa resonate with my findings, at least in part, as I have discussed above. His emphasis on the means of destruction (rather than production) for grasping the development of political power and social stratification in precolonial West African kingdoms is also pertinent.<sup>14</sup> During the colonial and post-colonial period, education became the most important means of social differentiation, eventually leading to the emergence of social classes. Education allowed access to employment, usually in the public sector. Interestingly, when compared with pre-colonial kingdoms, formerly stateless societies often had a head start in careers based on formal education. In the former, the ruling houses were usually closely associated with Muslim scholars. They resisted Christian missions and were slower to accept formal, Western-style education than their acephalous neighbours.

Among the Dagara the Catholic mission proselytised successfully from 1929. The newly converted Catholics soon sent their children to the mission-established schools. In the Lawra District, by the 1950s there were two substantial cohorts of educated men (and a few women) that partly competed and partly cooperated with each other. The smaller group consisted of graduates from the government schools that the British had established, mainly in order to educate

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<sup>14</sup> Some historians have, however, insisted that the exploitation of labour, through the institution of slavery, played an equally important role. The distinctiveness of African political formations and the question of Africa's supposed classlessness was discussed at length in the late 1960s and 1970s, with some overspill into the 1980s; see Coquery-Vidrovitch (1977) and Terray (1979) for contrasting positions; see also Kopytoff 1989. On the debate as to whether the concept of class is useful for analysing African history, see Lentz 2015: 11–14; also Neubert 2019: 85–128.

future chiefs (who were reluctant to send their children to Christian schools). The more numerous group comprised alumni of the mission-run schools who usually recruited their students among the ‘commoners’, that is, families not connected with chieftaincy (Lentz 2006: 133–137, 171–174, 201–203; see also Goody 1987: 142).

After the Second World War, graduates of middle schools in Lawra District were increasingly able to attend senior high school in Tamale. Until well into the 1960s, even a middle-school leaving certificate guaranteed relatively well-paid white-collar employment. Employment outside the home region became more widespread as Dagara high school graduates began to attend university, from the 1960s onwards. At the same time, the window of opportunity that the Africanisation of the civil service had opened after independence now closed. Although even university graduates began to face stiff competition on the job market, educated Dagara urbanites invested in the education of their children, seeking to perpetuate the elite or middle-class status that they had gained by sending their offspring to the best public or private schools. As Goody notes in a perceptive chapter on the impact of European schooling, “the system of education, earlier an open channel to social mobility, now becomes an instrument of status preservation” (Goody 1987: 140; cf. Foster 1980, Miller 1974).

Highly educated men and women from Lawra District rarely invested in business or entrepreneurship. Some tried their luck with commercial agriculture, but not very successfully (see e.g. Goody 1980: 145). Investment in urban property and real estate was more common. This continues to be an important strategy today: professionally successful and well-to-do Dagara couples typically buy or construct a house in Ghana’s capital (or any other large city where they work) with the intention of renting it out after their retirement; they acquire another house in the regional capital Wa in order to settle there as pensioners; finally they build a house in their original village as a material statement that expresses membership in an extended kin group and local community. As these middle-class nuclear families accumulate more assets, including cars, expensive furniture and a range of electric appliances, the intergenerational transfer of property becomes ever more conflict-laden. The families I met from the 1980s onwards, both educated and illiterate, had shifted from matrilineal towards a strictly patrilineal inheritance of moveable goods – a significant change, supported by the Catholic church, from what Goody had found

in the 1950s. However, adherence to norms of patrilineal inheritance of both moveable and immoveable property does not prevent bitter struggles over the division of property objects between the wife and direct sons and daughters vis-à-vis the deceased person's brothers.

In addition to the shift towards patrilineal inheritance and the attempt, at least among middle-class families, to restrict heirs to one's immediate offspring, marriage patterns have also changed. The trend is towards class-endogamous marriage (even though the taboo against marriage within the same patrician continues to be observed). The institution of bridewealth, about which Goody has written so much, is still vital. However, in some ways it is becoming an instrument for accentuating class boundaries rather than redistributing wealth among extended kin groups and levelling social inequality, as Goody's classical model proposed. Many not so prosperous youth and their parents consider bridewealth payments to be prohibitively high, and postpone the traditional marriage ceremonies (church marriage is not an alternative because Catholic clergy demand that traditional obligations be fulfilled before the sacrament). Even when bridewealth is paid, the fact that middle-class families tend to intermarry, and the increasing tendency for both men and women to marry outside their ethnic group, limit the redistributive impact of this form of marriage payment.

The upwardly mobile consider it of great symbolic and social importance to maintain good relations with their extended families, including family members who are considered 'less fortunate'. This implies lending at least some support to non-middle-class relations (Lentz 1994). Funerals continue to constitute the major arena at which social relations and status among the Dagara are performed, negotiated and (re)produced. But just like marriages, funerals, too, have become instruments for establishing and exhibiting class boundaries (Lentz 2009b; Lobnibe 2017).

My conclusion here is that, with regard to social stratification among the Dagara, and Africans more generally, the continent can no longer serve as a neat contrast to Eurasia. If Goody's comparative analysis of classless Africa was pertinent for the pre-colonial period, it certainly does not hold for colonial and post-colonial times. Comparison of the underlying structural causes and development paths of social inequality has to cut across continental bounda-

ries, and attend to the many regional and even local variations of the contours of class formation. Here too, as with political authority, it will be interesting to continue the debate on the legacy of pre-colonial (and colonial) institutions for contemporary African societies.

### *The Creation of Ethnicity*

Goody's discussion in his monographs on the LoDagaa of how to delimit the ethnic group under study can be read as a prelude to the constructivist understanding of ethnicity that became mainstream in social anthropology somewhat later (Barth 1969). Already in the mid-1950s, scholars of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute (e.g. Mitchell 1956) showed that ethnic boundaries could be (re)drawn situationally, and that labour migrants would create new ethnic groups in urban settings. In later articles the Manchester school made its critique of conventional ideas of static rural 'tribes' and new theoretical concepts such as that of 'situational ethnicity' more explicit (Mitchell 1970; Southall 1970; for an overview, see Lentz 1995). Goody was certainly a pioneer in challenging conventional notions of clearly bounded tribes. He argued convincingly against the simplistic, essentialist notions of ethnic belonging that many colonial officers, but also anthropologists of the time cherished.

It is no coincidence that Goody developed this critique of tribes in his research among the LoDagaa in the Black Volta region. From the early 1900s onwards, colonial officers had voiced doubts as to the definition of ethnic boundaries among the 'Lobi' and 'Dagarti'. They did not question the idea of tribes as such. They were convinced that every African, also in the Black Volta region, belonged to one, and only one tribe. However, they soon discovered that cultural and linguistic differences did not correspond neatly with tribal identities, but rather created a complex matrix of differences and similarities. Ethnic groups existed but were difficult to fix on the map, various district commissioners argued, because villages were 'intermixed' and compounds 'scattered' (see Lentz 2006: 72–93). In the 1920s, when the officers had become more familiar with the local populations, their ethnic categorisations became more nuanced than the earlier simple distinctions between Lobi, Dagarti and Sisala.

For the 1921 population census District Commissioner Duncan-Johnstone, for instance, drew up a detailed table with sub-categories such as the ‘Lobi Burifo, Lobi Dagarti, Lobi Wili, Dagarti and Issalla Grunshi’ (quoted in Lentz 2006: 84). The French administrator-anthropologist Henri Labouret (1931: 215ff.) refined this scheme further, but also noted that the acephalous groups lacked a sense of tribeship – an idea also advanced by Madeline Manoukian (1951).

Goody’s earliest overview (1954: 23–25) of the ethnic composition of the population in the Black Volta region largely followed Duncan-Johnstone’s and Labouret’s schemes. Later, he developed them further and introduced his own system of ethnic names (Goody 1956: 16–26). Goody observed that the local actors’ self-designations and the names they gave to neighbouring groups were to a certain extent directional and flexible, depending on which cultural traits they wanted to highlight. Searching for the underlying cultural logic of these changeable situational designations, Goody found that the local population connoted the term ‘Lo’ with matrilinear inheritance, the importance of matrilineal clans and a particular type of xylophone while ‘Dagaa’ was associated with patrilinearity and further cultural traits that distinguished them from the ‘Lo’. Any group, Goody writes, “unable to visualize its unity from within, defines itself in opposition to the surrounding peoples, who are considered in relation to the two cultural poles, *Lo* and *Dagaa*” (ibid.: 24). Goody’s mapping of local designations of ‘others’ on to a directional grid of different cultural practices is intriguing, but it over-systematises. The geographical directions of East and West probably never corresponded as neatly with the actors’ cultural stereotypes of the ‘Dagaa’ and the ‘Lo’ as Goody suggests. More importantly, his classification underestimates the impact of the value-laden judgements of outsiders. British and French district commissioners, but also neighbouring Ghanaians and Ivorians all regarded the Lobi as particularly primitive, while the Dagaba were held to be somewhat more civilised – an ethnic stigmatisation to which people on the ground responded by changing their self-declared identification. As early as the 1910s and 1920s, Dagaba soldiers or labour migrants preferred to have the tribal label ‘Dagarti’ put in their documents rather than ‘Lobi’. By 1960, the census, partly based on self-classification, recorded fewer than five per cent Lobi as against over eighty per cent Dagaba (Lentz 2006: 84–86).

Ultimately, Goody was interested in mapping cultural differences for comparative purposes, not in exploring the politics of the actors’ self-designations.

Paradoxically, however, Goody's invented terms LoDagaa, LoWiili and others became, over the years, a foil against which local intellectuals could propose their own supposedly 'true' ethnic nomenclature. Local cultural entrepreneurs saw in the anthropologist an external, and ultimately colonial, observer who did not understand Dagara society, or at least not its ethnic categories. However, as I could observe in many discussions among Dagara intellectuals, but also among villagers, people continue to disagree as to the 'correct' ethnic names (Lentz 2006: 259–263). Ironically, the fact that they tend to unite by virtue of the dynamics of segmentary opposition against external names, be it the Ghanaian label of Dagarti or Goody's artificial terms, confirms precisely the latter's observation concerning the absence of an established, consensual set of group names.

What about the relevance of ethnic identifications and solidarity for people's activities beyond the contested issue of nomenclature? Goody's claim was that in the 1950s, and certainly not before, ethnicity did not play a role. People identified with their locality or with supra-local patricians, but not with ethnic groups. However, my research into the history of settlement and migration has shown that signs of ethnic consciousness can already be found in the late nineteenth century, when Dagara groups opposed Muslim traders and slave raiders, but also the Sisala. Particularly on the settlement frontier, numerous clashes between Dagara and Sisala speaking groups can be connected to resource competition. To which extent ethnic solidarity in border zones also promoted a sense of community in the 'hinterland' is an open question. There, communal conflict did indeed follow the fault lines of patrician and locality. Of course, there are methodological difficulties in reconstructing how people defined themselves in past generations. It is possible that my interlocutors projected contemporary ethnic categories into the past. However, the colonial records of the early years of colonial rule confirm the oral traditions that I collected in suggesting that some sense of ethnic commonality beyond kinship and locality was socially significant, even if it did not create bounded groups with a political constitution, as the British usage of 'tribe' would suggest (Lentz 2013: 167–184).

By the time of Goody's research in the 1950s, concepts of belonging to a tribe had long since taken hold among the population. All the factors that work by Terence Ranger (1983) and others on the 'invention of ethnicity' have highlighted were in place. Labour migrants were familiar with the colonial offic-



ers' discourse on tribes, organised solidarity along ethnic lines in the places of work, and selected the 'tribal headmen' that the British demanded (Lentz 2006: 146–152). These ideas fed back into local discourses in the North. Moreover, the Catholic Church proselytised along ethnic-linguistic boundaries and created ideas of commonality along these lines. And thirdly, chiefs and their elders had an interest in enlarging their spheres of influence by appealing to a putatively larger ethnic community which they claimed to represent. Precisely in Birifu, when Goody lived there, the Birifu Naa argued against the Lawra paramount chief to whom he was officially subservient that he and his people belonged to a completely different 'tribe' than Lawra, and should therefore have his own paramount chiefdom and his own local council (Lentz 2006: 185–187).

In the late 1980s, when I started my research, ethnic conflict was rife, particularly between the Dagara of Nandom and the Sisala of Lambussie. Disputes over land and district boundaries were strongly ethnicised. Many local actors explained the ongoing clashes in terms of opposing ethnic personalities and group characteristics. The Youth and Development Associations, established in the 1970s ostensibly without reference to ethnicity, were in fact ethnically defined and excluded local residents who did not belong to the relevant 'autochthonous' ethnic group (Lentz 2006: 234–237). In short, for an ethnographer at the time it was nearly impossible to avoid ethnicity. In consequence, I devoted much time to tracing the historical roots and exploring the contemporary relevance of this social membership category.

### *Conclusion*

I hope that this lecture has shown how much inspiration I have found in Goody's ethnographic writings on the LoDagaa, as well as in his comparative studies of property and social stratification and his work on communication, memory and literacy. This said, I believe that his ethnography of the LoDagaa needs to be complemented, both with regard to the historical contextualisation of his findings from the 1950s and, of course, with respect to the developments of Dagara society since Goody left the field. These developments, in turn, may also throw a new light on some of Goody's earlier observations.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight three aspects in which Goody's fieldwork among the Dagara differs from my own. First and most obvious, we conducted fieldwork at different historical moments. I worked in Ghana's Upper West Region from the late 1980s, in conditions of intense political and ethnic conflict, when land rights, ethnic boundaries and chieftaincy succession were all hotly contested. Goody worked in the early 1950s, during the period of decolonisation. Actually, this too was a time of intense political rivalry and chieftaincy disputes, but Goody was not interested in these issues; admittedly, they may not have cut into the local fabric of kinship and ritual as deeply as the conflicts I observed some thirty-five years later.

Secondly, we conducted fieldwork in different ways. Goody followed a classical anthropological pattern, living in a single village in 1950–1951 for some twelve months and spending another nine months in 1952 in a neighbouring community. All subsequent visits to the Dagara were very brief; he conducted more substantive research further south, among the Gonja, together with his wife Esther. I started with a rather short visit to Nandom and Hamile in 1987, then carried out several months of fieldwork among Dagara migrants in the gold mines in Southern Ghana, and then, in 1989–1990, a further half a year of fieldwork in the Nandom area (not in one village, but rather a range of villages under the Nandom paramount chief). Since then I have visited the area – not only Dagara, but also Sisala settlements in Ghana and neighbouring regions in Burkina Faso – on more than twenty occasions, adding up to about three years. I have become very closely attached to one extended family, on whose changing politics of memory I am currently writing a book with Isidore Lobnibe, a member of that family and professor of social anthropology in the US. Interview work has led me to dozens of other villages, in some of which I have combined survey-type work with in-depth studies and repeated visits. While I have stayed faithful to the area and people, my research themes have changed, from labour migration to the social and political history of the area, land rights and settlement history, discourses on ethnicity and autochthony, cultural festivals, and the emergence of a middle class, to name but the most important ones.

Furthermore, I worked like a historian, spending many months in the colonial (and post-colonial) archives and taking the methodology of source criticism seriously, endlessly comparing documents and trying to document authors' perspectives and what could be classified as 'facts'. With regard to oral

traditions, too, I have worked with hundreds of interviews, comparing multiple versions and trying to make sense of my interlocutors' often competing claims. Working in a period when a number of Dagara intellectuals had developed their own accounts of their culture, and when paramount and divisional chiefs were usually literate and insisted on reading what the anthropologist wrote about them, constituted a further challenge. The 'natives' were definitely 'gazing and talking back' (Jacobs-Huey 2002) in a much more self-asserted way than during Goody's times.

Thirdly, Goody and I had different theoretical interests. He saw in the LoDagaa a prime example of a society without writing, without a state, based on intricate networks of kinship, and so forth. He was interested in comparative sociology, first in the analysis of the micro-dynamics of patrilinearity and matrilinearity in terms of bridewealth, property regimes and inheritance, later in a macro-level study of world history, opposing classless Africa and stratified Eurasia. I was and continue to be more interested in local power dynamics, and the micro-level investigation of how people draw, contest and revise group boundaries. I look at the interplay of local cultural forms and regional as well as national and global regimes and practices. I share Goody's enthusiasm for comparative perspectives, but the range and scale of comparison are different. I use my ethnographic and historical data as case-study materials to challenge conventional wisdom and grand-scheme concepts (such as colonial rule, chieftaincy, the middle class, or neopatrimonialism). I engage in comparison with similar cases in order to tease out the decisive factors that have shaped my specific case. Unlike Goody, I am not interested in developing a large typology or a world-encompassing dichotomy of Eurasia versus Africa. But like him, I am convinced that some of the more recent political and cultural developments among the Dagara and their neighbours continue to be at least partly shaped by their political and cultural past as a stateless society with a particular social organisation. And like Jack Goody, I believe that it is productive to ground cultural analysis in a sound understanding of a society's political economy.

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