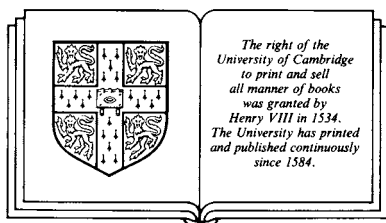


WA AND THE WALA

Islam and polity in northwestern Ghana

IVOR WILKS

Department of History
Northwestern University



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1

Wa and the Wala

Introduction

Why is Wala? Nothing in its environment decrees that it should be. The climate is unreliable, the soils indifferent, and disease rife. There are, however, its people. Wala is, because people at some point in time decided that it should be and at other points in time took further decisions to ensure that it should continue to be. People made Wala, but, to use one of Karl Marx's memorable phrases, they did not make it under circumstances of their own choice. The very indifference of the environment meant that their strategies for survival were often more in the nature of gambles than of calculable expectations.

Wala is an antique land. Its agrarian base was created perhaps between three and four millennia ago. No one can say how often, over that span of time, older peoples have been displaced by newer, or have been overrun and assimilated without trace. Today, despite the seemingly inexorable forces that are impelling people to congregate in towns with or without any obvious means of support, the majority of the Wala remain rural. They live in family 'compounds', some with a hundred or more members, which are often grouped to form larger or smaller villages. In the less densely populated areas, fallows are long. In the more densely populated areas, particularly around the town of Wa, continuous cultivation has become usual. The soils in the more northern and western parts of the region favour cereal cultivation, and in the more southern, yam.¹ Livestock never quite flourishes, but the more northerly the location the better it does. Cattle are reared for local slaughter and for sale at more distant markets. They are also a mark of wealth. They are used for marriage payments and for procuring political support, and are sacrificed on festive occasions. Few herds number more than 200 head, and rustling is not uncommon. Vegetable gardening is everywhere a necessity; hunting is now little more than a gainful sport.

The town of Wa has long enjoyed the status of a central place. Until the end of the nineteenth century it was indeed the capital of the small but independent Wala polity. The first agent of the Government of the Gold Coast Colony to visit the town testified to its distinctive appearance. 'Wa is

Wa and the Wala



Plate 1 The palace of the Wa Na, Ashura Festival, 1966



Plate 2 Wa Central Mosque, early twentieth century

not a walled city', wrote G. E. Ferguson in 1894, 'but the flat roofed buildings and date palms present it with an eastern appearance. It is the capital of Dagarti.'² It was quite apparent that the town was a seat of authority. 'At Wa, as in other towns in this part of the bend of the Niger', the first Frenchman to arrive there, Lieutenant Baud, wrote in 1895, 'there are



Plate 3 The British fort at Wa, c. 1902

three authorities: the king, the Iman, and the chief of the capital [*village-capitale*].³ He was acknowledging one of the basic features of Wala society, that is, the plurality of authority derived from access to the instruments of coercion (the 'king' or Wa Na), to Islam (the Imam), and to the Earth-god. In the last decade of the nineteenth century the most visible symbols of the three kinds of authority were the palace of the Wa Na, a somewhat undistinguished but rambling flat-roofed building,⁴ subsequently rebuilt in a style more appropriate to the office (plate 1); the impressive mosque built in the Western Sudanese idiom (plate 2); and the Dzandzan Pool in which dwelt crocodiles sacred to the Earth-god. To these was to be added, in 1898, the British fort, symbol of the arrival of a new and overarching authority (plate 3).

French forces, from their bases on the Senegal, moved into the region of the Upper and Middle Niger in the early 1880s. In 1893 Jenne was occupied, and in early 1897 the Mossi kingdom of Wagadugu. From their bases on the Gold Coast the British carried out the occupation of Kumase at the beginning of 1896. Wa was, for a time, the object of intense interest to both powers, the key to control of that extensive tract of territory lying immediately east of the Black Volta which the French tended to describe as part of 'Gourounsi' and the British to distinguish as 'Dagarti'. On 4 May 1894 G. E. Ferguson had signed a Treaty of Friendship and Trade with Wa Na Saidu Takora, and the 'Country of Dagarti, otherwise known as Dagaba' was thereby regarded as within the British sphere of influence.⁵ A year later, almost to the day, the same Wa Na signed a Treaty of Protection with Lieutenant Baud, representing the French government.⁶ The British reasserted and strengthened their claims to the 'Country of Dagarti' by a Treaty of Friendship and Protection of 9 January 1897. The principals were Lieutenant F. B. Henderson and Na Saidu.⁷ On 12 June 1897, however, Na

Wa and the Wala

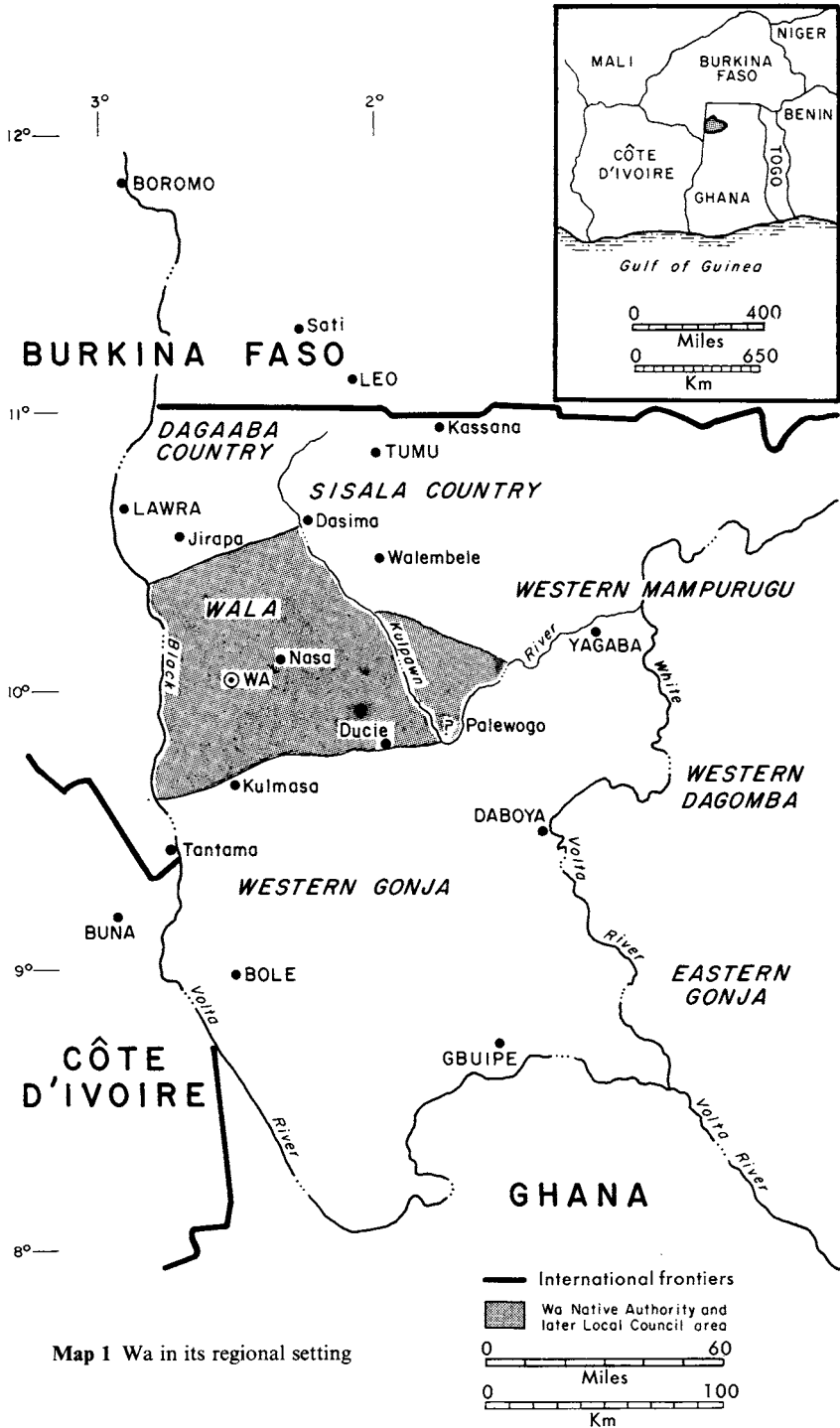
Saidu entered into yet another treaty with Captain Hugot, representing French interests.⁸ After a flurry of diplomatic activity and military posturing such as to make an armed engagement between French and British troops seem inevitable at the end of 1897, the French finally abandoned their claims to Wa.⁹ The town and its dependent villages became part of an ill-defined British military command known as the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. These territories were formally constituted a Protectorate by an Order of Council of 26 September 1901, which placed them under the jurisdiction of the Governor of the Gold Coast Colony. The Wala had lost their independence.

The Wala polity

It is impossible to map the boundaries of the nineteenth-century Wa polity with precision, for they were not precisely defined. In 1894 Ferguson questioned Wa Na Saidu on the very topic. The Daboya Volta, the Na said, 'ran in the neighbourhood of Walembele. It is between this river and the one running past Tantama that his territory extended northward to Dasima, a week's journey from Wa'. The Daboya Volta is clearly the Kulpawn River, which joins the White Volta above Daboya. Tantama is on the Black Volta. In so far, then, as Ferguson accurately represented the Na's response, his jurisdiction was regarded as extending from the Black Volta in the west to the valley of the Kulpawn in the east, and from Dasima in the northeast to Tantama in the southwest. The situation, however, was a confused one. The Wa Na also informed Ferguson that a number of villages under his authority were currently in rebellion. These included Charipon ('Cherapaw'), Sampina ('Sawpawna'), Busie ('Busei') and Nandaw.¹⁰ All were situated in the northern part of the area, across the country between the Black Volta and Dasima (map 1).

Three years later, in 1897, Henderson entered Wa territory from the south. He identified Kulmasa as 'the frontier town of Dagarti, of which Wa is the capital'.¹¹ He appears, however, to have made no further attempt to describe the extent of the 'Country of Dagarti' though this did not deter him from committing the British to its protection. In fact the Wa Na's authority had disintegrated further since the time of Ferguson's visit. The rebellions of 1894 had not only sustained their momentum but had spread into virtually all of the northern villages over which the Wa Nas had claimed authority. The situation was analysed in reports by Lieutenant-Colonel H. P. Northcott. At the very beginning of 1898 he found that all but one of the 'Dagarti' dependencies had repudiated the Wa connection for over a year. The exception was Mwankuri ('Makauri'), to the northwest of Busie. Referring to 'a declaration by the Dagartis of their independence', Northcott therefore felt it necessary to enter into new treaty arrangements with each of their major centres: with Kaleo on 10 December 1897, and with Issa (including Samanbaw), Busie (including Nandaw), Wogu and Nadawli between 9 and

The Wala Polity



Map 1 Wa in its regional setting

Wa and the Wala

11 January 1898.¹² The rebellions, moreover, affected not only the northern villages but also the Dorimon district west of Wa. For good measure, a separate treaty was signed with it on 2 January 1898.¹³

The changed situation was described by Captain D. Mackworth in a military intelligence report of 6 June 1898. Acknowledging the fact of the rebellions, he felt obliged to draw a distinction between 'the country of Wa' and 'the country of Dagarti'. The former, he remarked, somewhat ingenuously

comprises all the districts which acknowledge the King of Wa as their chief. It is bounded on the north by Dagarti, which country comes down to within four miles of the town of Wa; from Wa the line is roughly drawn in a northeast direction till it strikes the Kulpawn River, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Kajikewri [Kojopere], which is a Wa village. The eastern boundary is a line from the Kulpawn River, through Dusei [Ducie], Dusei and its small villages being the most east Wa district. On the south it is bounded by the country of Bole, boundary uncertain. On the west it is bounded by Lobi, the river Volta being the boundary.¹⁴

With little more than these few reports to inform their policy, in 1898 the British military administrators mapped out the region. The 'Country of Dagarti' of the treaties of 1894 and 1897 was divided into a Dagarti Sub-District to the north and a Wa Sub-District to the south, and both were included with the Bole and Gurunshi Sub-Districts in the Black Volta District.¹⁵ Probably more out of ignorance than by design, the boundary between the Wa and Dagarti Sub-Districts was drawn with scant regard for the realities of the situation. Old Wala villages such as Nasa were placed within the latter, for example, while the former was extended southwards to embrace districts over which the Wa Nas had never claimed jurisdiction.

In 1907, civil administration was established throughout the Protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. The Dagarti and Wa Sub-Districts were combined to form the Wa District, the boundaries of which were revised to correspond more or less closely with those of the Wa polity before its decay in the late nineteenth century. In particular, the villages which had rebelled were for the most part reintegrated into the Wa District; only the northernmost were assigned to the Lawra District for reasons of administrative convenience. Not surprisingly, there was persistent opposition to this reconstitution of the older jurisdiction and as late as 1925 the Governor of the Gold Coast was obliged to clarify the situation by Order in Council:

The Wa District shall comprise all the lands subject to the Chief of the Wala tribe, together with that portion of the lands occupied by the Dagati tribe lying South of the Izeri River and that portion of the land occupied by the Isala Grunshi tribe on the right bank of the Kulpawn River.¹⁶

By the Native Courts, Native Authority and Native Treasuries Ordinances of 1932 a system of indirect rule was introduced into the Protectorate of the

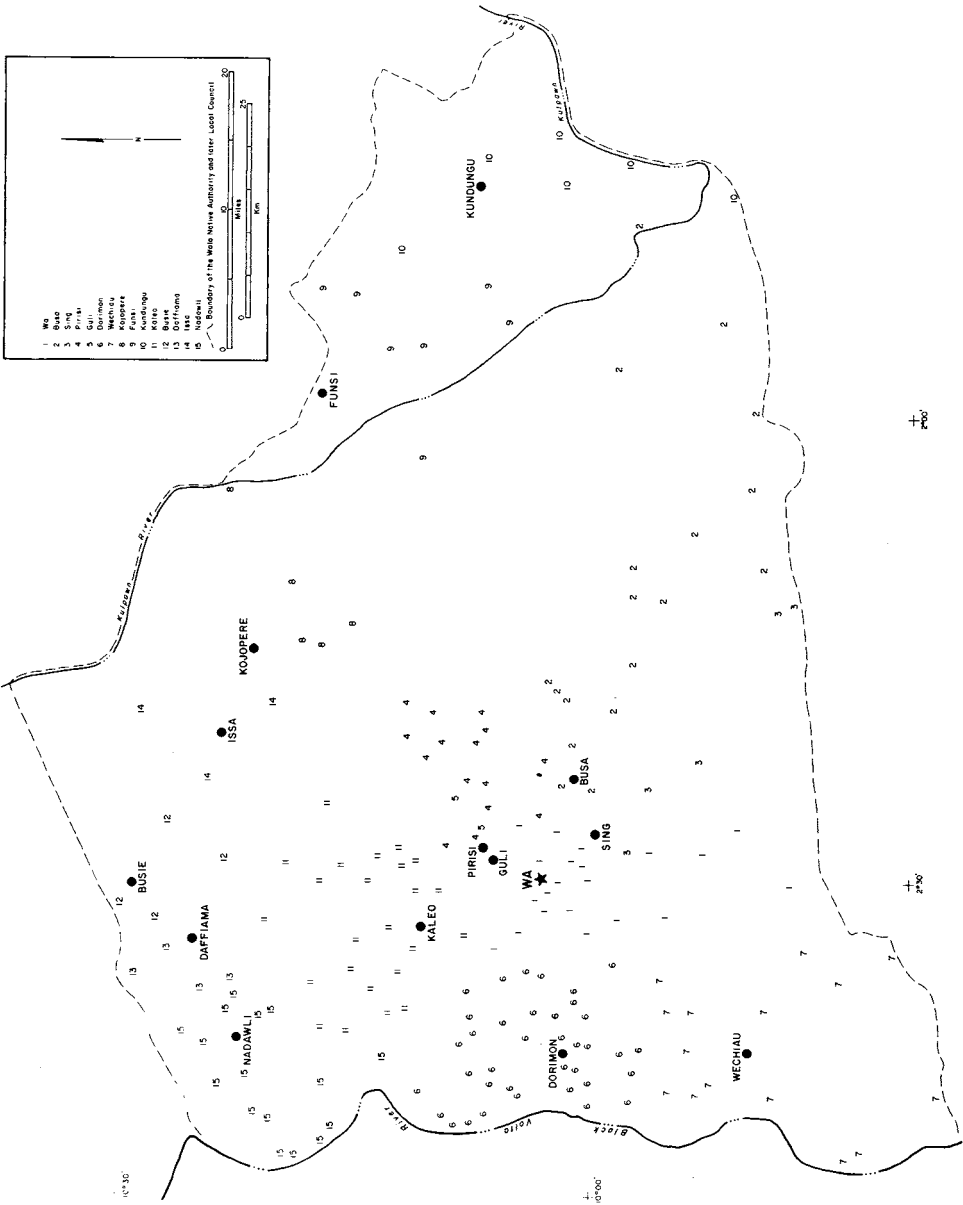
Table 1.1. *Wa and its Divisions under the Native Authority system*

Division	Category	Population	
		1931	1948
Wa	Wala	13,025	15,827
Busa	Wala	4,498	4,629
Sing	Wala	1,818	2,363
Pirisi	Wala	2,351	3,139
Guli	Wala	[included in Pirisi]	
Dorimon	Wala	8,017	10,152
Wechiau	Wala	5,463	6,988
Kojopere	Wala	2,905	1,614
Funsi	Sisala	2,529	3,184
Kundungu	Sisala	2,923	2,267
Kaleo	Dagarti	12,055	16,760
Busie	Dagarti	3,079	4,579
Daffiama	Dagarti	2,158	2,544
Issa	Dagarti	2,593	3,398
Nadawli	Dagarti	8,702	8,035
Total		72,116	85,479

Northern Territories. In the following year the Wala Native Authority (frequently referred to as the 'Wala State' or even more anachronistically as the 'Kingdom of Wala') was set up. The colonial administrators were required carefully to ascertain the extent and nature of pre-colonial jurisdictions and in the case of Wa this was again interpreted to mean the jurisdiction prior to the rebellions of the 1890s. The boundaries of the existing Wa District were found to be acceptable approximations to those of the pre-colonial Wala polity (map 1).

The Wala Native Authority embraced 3,362 square miles of country. Under the overarching authority of the District Commissioner, the Wa Na presided over the affairs of Wa town with its villages, and over those of fourteen Divisions.¹⁷ Seven of the Divisions were regarded as 'Wala', two as 'Sisala' and five as 'Dagarti'. The structure of the Native Authority, and its population according to the Gold Coast Censuses of 1931 and 1948,¹⁸ is shown in table 1.1 and on map 2.

The population of the district embracing Wa and its Divisions has increased rapidly in the present century. A count carried out in 1921 is the earliest upon which some reliance may be placed, though there is little doubt that many smaller communities escaped attention.¹⁹ Progressively more accurate were the Censuses of 1931, 1948, 1960, 1970 and 1984.²⁰ The returns are shown in table 1.2. Wa remains the only urban centre in the district, no other place having at present a population in excess of 5,000. With its palace,



Map 2 Principal Wala villages, by Division

Table 1.2. *Population, Wa and the fourteen divisions*

Year	Population	Density per sq. mile	% of population in Wa Town
1921	43,168	12.8	6.5
1931	72,323	21.5	7.2
1948	85,479	25.5	6.0
1960	130,964	38.95	11.0
1970	153,909	45.78	13.9
1984	223,643	66.52	16.1

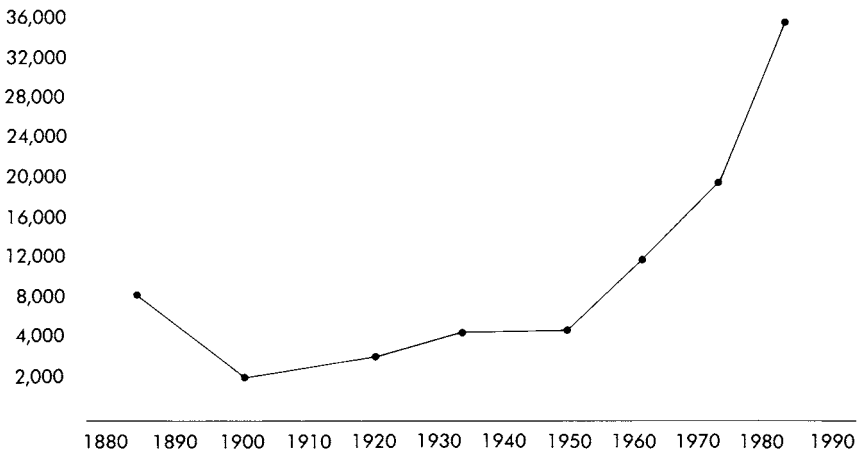


Figure 1 Population of Wa town, c. 1885 to 1984

mosques and schools, and its general cosmopolitan aspect, the town has long been a centre of culture, and the distinction between townfolk and *fulfulé*, peasants, is one deeply rooted in the mentality of its people.²¹ Under the successive governments of the Gold Coast and Ghana it has remained a seat of regional administration. Change in its population can be reconstructed over the last hundred years, though the early figures are estimates rather than counts and at best crude approximations to the reality.²² Figure 1 indicates, however, the long-term effects of the collapse of the Wala polity in the troubled decades of the late nineteenth century.

Who are the Wala?

The homespun Census of 1921 broke down the population of the Wa District by 'tribe'. The number of Wala counted was 16,905, of Dagarti 19,619, of Grunshi (or Sisala) 5,346, and of others described as Fulani, Hausa, Lobi,

etc., 1,298. The Wala were, then, not the largest 'tribe' in Wala. No such analysis was attempted in the 1931 Census. In 1948, however, the Census takers were again required to identify people by 'tribe', and for this purpose were supplied with a list of sixty-two 'tribal divisions' covering the whole of the Gold Coast. Unfortunately the returns were compiled for the Wa Administrative District and not, separately, for the three Native Authorities which then constituted it, namely, Wa as such, Tumu, and the Lawra Confederacy. Four 'tribes' numerically dominated the whole Administrative District, the Dagarti (106,349 people), the Sisala (37,246), the Lobi (30,673) and the Wala (22,299). It is impossible to establish the distribution of these groups within the three component Native Authorities. There were, however, 25,923 Wala in the whole of the Gold Coast, of whom 22,802 were resident in the Northern Territories. Of these latter, all but a few of the 22,299 in the Wa Administrative District were undoubtedly resident in the Wa Native Authority area. Since its total population in 1948 was 85,479, it follows that only about a quarter of its people were classified as Wala.²³

The 1960 Census allows for more precision. The concept of ethnicity was much in vogue in scholarly circles in the 1950s and 1960s, and an enumeration by 'tribal divisions' was attempted, avowedly 'to give the research worker in the social sciences (especially the sociologist) a few basic data on population groups which are distinguished by certain characteristics and are generally referred to as tribes or tribal groupings'.²⁴ 47,200 Wala were enumerated throughout Ghana, of whom 37,320 were in the Northern Region (that is, the former Northern Territories). Of these 33,920 were resident in the Wala Local Council District, corresponding to the older Wala Native Authority area. They comprised, therefore, 26% of the population of 130,973 recorded for that District, much the same proportion as that indicated for 1948.

The overall profile of the Wala Local Council District by 'tribe' in 1960 was: Dagarti, 50%; Wala, 26%; Lobi, 13%; Sisala, 5%; and a miscellany of others, 6%.²⁵ These data are, however, too raw to be of much use until they are superimposed upon a matrix of historical, geographical and ethnographical materials. The problem in characterizing the four principal 'tribes' identified in the Census is that the labels 'Dagarti', 'Wala', 'Lobi' and 'Sisala' (or 'Grunshi') are not all semantically equivalent. Any discussion of this matter must proceed from J. R. Goody's painstaking and probably definitive analysis of the terms 'Dagarti' and 'Lobi' (and the many combinations and permutations of them), to which the reader is referred.²⁶

The Lobi of the 1921 Census, together with the Fulani, Hausa and others with whom they were grouped, then constituted less than 3% of the population of the Wa District. In 1960 the Lobi alone constituted 13%. The most obvious explanation of their increase, that it was a result of migration into Wala, is the correct one. This migration was still too insignificant to be noticed in the 1910s, though it had probably commenced.²⁷ Goody identifies the newcomers in question as Birifor, Dagaawiili and, though fewer,

Lowilisi from west of the Black Volta, moving to escape the higher taxation and more repressive conditions in French administered territory. Significantly, perhaps, the traditions of many of the immigrants make reference to a time when their ancestors had been forced to cross the river in the opposite direction as a result of invasions.²⁸ The Lobi, the District Commissioner of Wa reported in 1955, 'continue to migrate from French Territory in considerable numbers and, though some of them move south to Gonja, a large number stay in this district'. He considered them by then a majority of the population along the left bank of the Black Volta in the Dorimon and Wechiau Divisions of Wala.²⁹

In the 1921 census 5,346 Grunshi were counted in the Wa District, comprising 12.4% of the population. In 1960, when they are described as Sisala, they numbered 7,190, but constituted only 5% of the population. Their decline as a percentage of total population must largely reflect the demographic consequences of Lobi immigration. The Sisala villages of Wala lie in the broad but sparsely populated valley of the Kulpawn, almost all of them being east of that river. They are grouped around Funsi (population 1948: 1,193; 1960: 1,405) and Kundungu (population 1948: 584; 1960: 1,133). Their people speak Pasaala, one of the Sisala languages.³⁰ The clear implication of the 1948 Census of the Wa Administrative District, which enumerated 37,246 Sisala, is that considerably under a fifth of them were located specifically within the Wala Native Authority area.

The name 'Dagarti' appears to have been coined by the first Europeans to visit the region, from the vernacular root *dagaa*. Correctly, 'Dagari' is the name of the language, 'Dagaaba' or 'Dagara' that of the people, and 'Dagaw' or 'Dagawie' that of their land. In 1948, 106,349 Dagaaba were enumerated in the Wa Administrative District, when the *total* population of the Wala Native Authority area was only 85,479. Clearly, then, the majority of Dagaaba were not within the latter jurisdiction. Those that were lived, for the most part, in those Dagaaba villages over which the Wa Nas claimed authority in the nineteenth century, but whose people won a short-lived independence at the end of that century before the colonial administration restored the *status quo ante bellum*. The Dagaaba villages thus returned to Wala are grouped around a number of local centres, notably Busie (population 1948: 1,417; 1960: 1,556), Daffiama (population 1948: 1,162; 1960: 1,670), Issa (population 1948: 1,055; 1960: 1,364), Kaleo (population 1948: 1,127; 1960: 1,511), and Nadawli (population 1948: 713; 1960: 1,281). Of these, Kaleo was the most proximate (some eight miles) to Wa town, Busie the most distant (some thirty-two miles). In 1921 about 45.5% of the population of the Wa District was labelled 'Dagarti'. The count was 19,619 persons. By 1960, although the number enumerated had risen to 65,510, the percentage had not changed radically; Dagaaba comprised 50% of the total population. In these figures, the demographic effects of Lobi immigration are again apparent, tending to reduce the proportion of Dagaaba to total population. However, some migration of Dagaaba from parts of Dagawie

never historically within Wala also occurred in the period of the censuses. It cannot be quantified, but showed for the most part in the growth of a number of Dagaaba settlements around Tanina, near the Gonja border due south of Wa.³¹

Of the four categories used by the Census takers, that of the Wala as such is the most difficult to define. The problem was recognized, though not resolved, by the anthropologist R. S. Rattray, half a century ago. 'Wala', he wrote, 'as the name of a tribe, is in reality nothing more than an arbitrary title derived from the name of the capital town, Wa, and applied to the heterogeneous peoples who have nominally come under the jurisdiction of the *Na* (Chief) of that place.'³² Rattray was correct in seeing that the description 'Wala' denoted not a 'tribe' but 'heterogeneous peoples'. He was incorrect, however, in characterizing them as only nominally under the jurisdiction of the Wa Nas. The Wala were those who not only recognized the authority of the Wa Nas, but who identified themselves with the whole system of governance of which the Nas were themselves part. Cultural assimilation and not simply political domination is at issue.

The common language of the Wala is Walii, which is a dialect of Dagari little different from that spoken in Kaleo and the other Dagaaba villages of the district. For the vast majority of the Wala this is also their first language. The mass of the Wala are undoubtedly Dagaaba by origin. There is also a significant element that is of Mande or Mandeka background. This was recognized by L. G. Binger almost a century ago, when he described the basic population of Wala as 'Dagari' or 'Dagabakha' mixed with 'Mande-Dioula'.³³ The situation gives rise to the perplexing linguistic conventions current in Wa town and its environs. There are, for example, Wala Muslims who use a Malinke dialect (Juula) as their first language and identify themselves as Wala, but who refer to their unconverted Wala compatriots as Dagaaba, a term which in this context virtually takes on the meaning of 'pagan'. Those so described, however, invariably refer to themselves as Wala and firmly resist identification for any purposes, Census or otherwise, with the unassimilated Dagaaba of the northern belt of the Wala district. To compound the confusion, the chiefly class in Wala is neither Dagaaba nor Mande by origin, but Mamprusi. They identify themselves as Wala for most purposes, but in certain contexts as *Wala piene*, 'white Wala'.

The truth of the matter is that the concept of 'tribe' or even of 'ethnicity' is too crude to be of more than marginal value in investigating the nature of the Wala polity. People may identify themselves, or be identified by observers, in one context by reference to historical origins, in another to language and culture, and in yet another to traditional political affiliation. The Censuses not only fail to distinguish Wala of Dagaaba from those of Mande or Mamprusi origins, but do not even hint at the existence of two other peoples who either identified themselves, or were identified by the census enumerators, as 'Wala'. These are the Potuli and Chakalle. The Potuli villages are clustered around Kojopere (population 1948, 747; 1960, 1347), some twenty-