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POLITICAL CHANGE IN NORTHERN GHANA
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THE LIONS OF DAGBON: 
POLITICAL CHANGE 
IN NORTHERN GHANA

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TO MY MOTHER AND
THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER
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This our business has nothing to do with writing and you keep trying to put it down and in the process you ruin it for us.

– An elder of the Ya-Na
PREFACE

‘The Lion of Dagbon’ is a praise-title of the paramount chiefs, the Ya-Nas, of the Dagomba people in northern Ghana. This study is concerned with the political history of the Dagomba kingdom, notably during the last seventy years when the kingdom has been subordinated to governments, successively colonial and national, in Accra and Tamale. Its purpose is to examine the policies which the overlords of Dagomba have adopted in order to preserve, exploit, and assimilate the pre-colonial structure of authority and also to consider changes in local politics which have come about, at least partly, through the action of these external authorities. The concluding chapters deal with the origins and character of a major dispute within the kingdom, the conflict which has come to be known in Ghanaian politics as ‘the Yendi skin dispute’.

My original interest in northern Ghanaian politics arose from earlier work on central-local relations in the Ivory Coast. It seemed to me, from fieldwork in the Ivory Coast, that relations between the national capital and the outlying, underdeveloped districts of the north involved a distinctive pattern of patronage-clientage and a distinctive set of attitudes towards government. After reading other studies (notably that by Dunn and Robertson in this series), I now regard the narrowness of patronage-clientage and the syndrome of dominance-cum-ingratiation to be found in the northern Ivory Coast as extreme forms of general phenomena rather than as regional peculiarities.

They are, nonetheless, interesting and I felt that it would be useful to explore a comparable case in northern Ghana. In the event, it was impossible to find a situation which was economically and geographically exactly comparable. Instead, I decided to explore a case in which there was the most apparent political interest in Ghana and an almost notorious involvement of ‘brokers’, namely, the Yendi skin dispute.

The research took me into a scene thickly inhabited by impassioned octogenarians and feuding bureaucrats, a fading but still quite colourful world which at times is reminiscent of Shakespeare or Sergei Eisenstein, at others of Cary and Waugh. I have tried, I hope not laboriously, to pass on some of the surrealism flavour produced by this mixture. After my reading of an infinite quantity of minutes and memoranda, the colonial encounter in Africa still seems to me a cultural mystery of the first order. Some sense of this mystery is conveyed by novelists like Cary and Orwell, both of whom had a special understanding of the intimate absurdities of colonialism. But the colonial encounter has not, on the whole, had the imaginative treat-
Preface

ment it deserves. On the one hand, we have the rather undiscriminating celebrations of the colonial service produced by Heussler and memoirists from the profession; on the other, we have the Punch and Judy spectacles beloved of some members of the Left. Both seem to lack an appreciation of the larger tragi-comedy which the colonial encounter involved.

As a study of African politics, the Dagomba case is interesting, both because of the sophisticated and elaborate nature of the pre-colonial state and because of the importance of the Dagomba people in present-day Ghana. Numbering rather over a quarter of a million, they constitute the largest group in the north and, until the 1972 coup, controlled six seats in the National Assembly. The Dagomba kingdom also provides a good case study in colonial government, since between the wars it attracted the attentions of an energetic and articulate team of ‘indirect rule’ administrators, whose programmes and correspondence are meticulously preserved in the Tamale archives.

As regards the theoretical implications of the study, these lie in the debatable ground between theories of international underdevelopment and the self-contained literature of tribal and community studies. This is certainly not a study of ‘political modernisation’ or ‘development’ in the conventional sense; nor is it, I hope, only a chronicle of court politics. In the perspective formed by development theory, the case study is, presumably, of limited interest, since it concerns an area of the neo-colonial hinterland which was relatively untouched by the dynamic processes of social and economic change under colonialism. Nor can it be said to exemplify the unequivocal onset of ‘modernity’.

The Dagomba case does, however, exemplify very well the consequences of uneven development. I have argued that during a considerable part of this century the major – at times the only – area of innovation has been in the political and administrative spheres. There has thus been change but, in C. S. Whitaker’s phrase, it has been a ‘dysrhythmic’ process – that is, an erratic and uncoordinated pattern of development, from which certain sectors emerge more transformed than others. Even in the political sphere, modernisation has been, to say the least, ambiguous in its effects. Northern Ghana came late into national politics and it did so with a structure of local government which was still dominated by the chiefs and their elders. The result has been the uneasy amalgamation or coexistence of several types of authority and persistent ‘boundary problems’ between them. There are at least three, ultimately incompatible principles of legitimation to which appeal may be made in Dagomba politics: the traditional, grounded in the authority of myth and precedent; the bureaucratic, deriving from the sovereignty of central (or, in some instances, royal) government; and the democratic, based on the representation of majorities.

This diversity is not, of course, unique to northern Ghana or to Africa but it is evident there to an extreme degree, because of the tempo of formal institutional change in the area during this century. The overall outcome is a pattern of politics which is often bizarre, occasionally violent, and
Preface

generally confused. All of these characteristics amply feature in the Yendi dispute, which would yield neither clarity of argument nor consistency of position even to the most sophisticated of analytic techniques. That it would not is, however, further evidence of the incoherence of relations between centre and periphery and between chiefly, elective, and administrative institutions in contemporary Ghana.

Concerning approach, this book is perhaps, in the worst sense, inter-disciplinary (more, possibly, sub- or extra-disciplinary). It may seem to some readers to be a disquieting mixture of history, political science, and anthropology, but I think that, at the risk of infuriating specialists, it is essential to bring the materials and ideas of these disciplines together if we are to make articulate sense of what is happening politically in African countries, and by extension elsewhere. Nevertheless, there are costs and these, I suspect, will be particularly evident to anthropologists. While preparing this book, I did not live in a village compound and my knowledge of Dagbane is, to put it mildly, reticent. I deliberately sought out, and have depended on, written materials, principally from the archives. As a result, the book probably lacks a well-informed sense of attitudes and values at village level and I regret that this is so. But I decided that, with the time and money at my disposal—not to mention my own lack of training in certain fields—I should concentrate on a particular set of relationships, those between members of the Dagomba ruling class and the representatives of suzerains.

One somewhat fortuitous limitation on the research should be mentioned, if only to explain the lack of certain details in the chapters concerned with politics in the fifties and sixties. It had been my intention to interview a wide range of politicians and chiefs involved with the parties, but shortly after I had started my programme of interviews, the then Regional Commissioner, Colonel Iddissah, decided that investigations touching upon the Yendi dispute might, unintentionally, have an inflammatory effect on the participants and I was asked, very courteously, to desist, which I did. I do not, therefore, regard the account given in Chapters 8 and 9 as much more than an outline and I hope that some day an energetic (and tactful) research student will probe further into party history in the area.

I was, indeed, given every assistance by government officials while engaged in fieldwork and I would like in particular to acknowledge the considerable kindness and material help I received from Mr R. A. Karbo, at the time District Administrative Officer for Tamale. I owe special gratitude also to Canon H. A. Blair of Truro who gave up a large amount of time to talk to me about colonial government in the thirties and who lent me some invaluable material, notably his unpublished memoirs. I have a particular debt to Bill and Anne Johnson who put me up in Oxford for the best part of a term. Of the many others who helped me during my research work, I would like to thank especially R. I. Alhassan, A. B. Baba, Tony Berrett, A. Tarponée Cobla, John Dunn, Elizabeth Hook, Dassana Iddi, Yahaya Iddi, Fisata Kabache, J. S. Kaleem, Christine Oppong, Charles and Gillian
Preface

Raab, Yaw and Fanny Saffu, Agnes Samuel, S. M. Sibidow, Terry and Anne Smutylo, Tia Sulemana, B. A. Yakubu (former Gushie-Na), and Salifu Yakubu. For their many kindnesses while I was writing this book, I am indebted to a host of friends, among them Brian and Jean Barr, Andrew and Anne Lockyer, Simon and Fanny Mitchell, Karin Reilly, Michel and Diane Verdon, and Stephen and Ishbel White. Among the librarians who gave me advice and assistance, I would single out for special thanks those at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and at Rhodes House in Oxford, at the Manuscripts Department of the University Library, Cambridge, and at the Northern Region Library in Tamale. Finance for the project was provided by the Social Science Research Council, the administration of which was most understanding of the problems which inevitably arose in the course of fieldwork. The Court of the University of Glasgow gave me leave of absence to pursue the research as well as a grant to cover typing expenses. The staff of the Cambridge University Press and the editors of this series gave me a great deal of help in preparing the work for publication and Jean Beverly, Sheila Hamilton, and Charlotte Logan assisted in the revision of the draft. Lastly, I should express my warm appreciation of the skill and efficiency of Mrs Jean Clydesdale, who produced an immaculate typescript out of a tangle of stapled and amended pages. To all of these, my sincere thanks. The defects which remain are, without exception, all my own work.

Glasgow
July 1974

M.S.
ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

Principal abbreviations used in the text and the notes

C. C. N. T. Chief Commissioner, Northern Territories
C. P. P. Convention People’s Party
C. R. O. Chief Regional Officer
D. A. O. District Administrative Officer
D. C. District Commissioner
D. P. O. District Political Officer
G. A. Government Agent
M. A. P. Moslem Association Party
N. A. Native Authority
N. A. G. A. National Archives of Ghana, Accra
N. A. G. T. National Archives of Ghana, Tamale
N. A. L. National Alliance of Liberals
N. L. C. National Liberation Council
N. P. P. Northern People’s Party
N. T. Northern Territories
N. T. C. Northern Territories Constabulary
P. C. Provincial Commissioner
P. P. Progress Party

Principal Dagbane terms used in the text

baga soothsayer
dagbandaba the commoner estate (lit. slaves)
dang clan, kindred
fong town or quarter of a town
ghonlanas regent of a king or a divisional chief
kambonse state musketeers
katini diu the hut in which a king is enskinned
kpamba elders, counsellors to a king or a chief
kpanala elder to a divisional chief
limam imam
na-bihe the royal sons; senior members of the royal family eligible for the skin of Yendi
## Abbreviations and glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nam (pl. nama)</td>
<td>skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na-yanse</td>
<td>royal sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tindana</td>
<td>royal grandsons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pl. tindamba)</td>
<td>fetish priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wulana</td>
<td>senior elder to divisional chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yidana</td>
<td>head, husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yili</td>
<td>house, compound</td>
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<tr>
<td>zuliya</td>
<td>male line of descent</td>
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</table>

In this work ‘District’ and ‘Region’ refer to the administrative units of colonial and post-colonial government; ‘district’ and ‘region’ refer to geographical areas.
Map 1. Northern Ghana, 1965