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978-0-521-10921-5 - Studies in Rural Capitalism in West Africa
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STUDIES IN RURAL CAPITALISM IN WEST AFRICA

by POLLY HILL

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON · NEW YORK · MELBOURNE

Cambridge University Press
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Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521109215

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First published 1970
Reprinted 1977
This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 77-96093

ISBN 978-0-521-07622-7 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-10921-5 paperback

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*To my daughter Susannah Humphreys, who
accompanied me on my travels*

The new arrangements on his farm absorbed him as completely as though there would never be anything else in his life. He read the books lent him by Sviazhsky and, having ordered various others that he required, he read political economy and socialistic works on the same subject, but, as he had expected, found nothing in them related to his undertaking. In the political economy books—in Mill, for instance, whom he studied first and with great ardour, hoping every minute to find an answer to the questions that were engrossing him—he found only certain laws deduced from the state of agriculture in Europe; but he could not for the life of him see why these laws, which did not apply to Russia, should be considered universal. . . Political economy told him that the laws by which Europe had developed and was developing her wealth were universal and absolute. Socialist teaching told him that development along these lines leads to ruin. And neither of them offered the smallest enlightenment as to what he, Levin, and all the Russian peasants and landowners were to do with their millions of hands and millions of acres, to make them as productive as possible for the common good.

Anna Karenin by L. N. Tolstoy,
trans. Rosemary Edmunds, Penguin Books, pp. 366–7

The condition of the native tribes had been investigated [by the official commission of enquiry] in its political, administrative, economic, ethnographic and religious aspects. All these questions had received admirably drafted answers—answers admitting no shade of doubt, since they were not a product of human thought, always liable to error, but were the outcome of official labours. The answers were all based on official data furnished by governors and prelates, founded on reports from district authorities and ecclesiastical superintendents, founded in their turn on the reports of rural administrative officers and parish priests. Consequently these answers left no possible room for doubt. Such questions, for instance, as to why crops failed, or why certain tribes adhered to their own creeds, and so on—questions which without the convenience of the official machine do not and cannot get solved for centuries—received clear and convincing answers.

ibid. p. 395

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Rosemary Edmunds and Penguin Books Ltd, for permission to include quotations from Rosemary Edmunds's translation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*. Earlier versions of two of the chapters have appeared elsewhere as articles in journals. 'A Plea for Indigenous Economics: the West African Example' appeared in (the *Journal of*) *Economic Development and Cultural Change* in October 1966 and 'Notes on the History of the Northern Katsina Tobacco Trade' appeared in the *Journal of the Historical Association of Nigeria* for October 1968. The author and the publishers would like to thank the editors of the journals concerned for their collaboration in readily agreeing to the republication of the articles.

PREFACE

This book is an attempt to provide social anthropologists, economists and geographers with *material* relating to the way in which rural people in West Africa order their economic behaviour. Believing in academic division of labour, I have deliberately avoided many theoretical and definitional issues which it would be conventional to discuss in a book with this kind of title and I draw hardly any ‘planning’ conclusions. But I have tried to avoid remoteness by constantly asking myself the question—‘What kinds of things are other people likely to want to know?’

Of course there are numerous reasons why many of the most interesting questions cannot be investigated—how one does wish, for instance, that granaries, like graves, were not private places. But I hope I have demonstrated the academic respectability of pursuing one’s fieldwork on the *assumption* that ‘economic factors’ are sufficiently isolable to justify an economic approach, even when many of the variables are wholly elusive. Anyway, I have found this assumption useful and leave it to others to judge by results.

As an economist turned economic anthropologist, I look for opportunities of placing my detailed field inquiries within a wider statistical framework, this being one way of arguing from the particular to the general. Had I not had access to the Department of Agriculture’s farm-maps in their Area Offices, my work on the migrant cocoa-farmers of southern Ghana (chapter 2) would have been impossible. The study of cattle-trading in Northern Ghana (chapter 5) leans wholly upon statistics made available to me by the Animal Health Division. Although I stayed long enough in a Hausa village (chapter 7) to collect a fair amount of statistical data for myself, an air photograph lent to me by the Survey Department at Kaduna was an indispensable aid to mapping the farms. But such a procedure of leaning heavily on pre-existent data is not always possible or necessary, as shown by the examples of the Ewe seine fishermen (chapter 3) and the Hausa tobacco-traders (chapter 6).

If one happens to fall on a large hoard of relevant official statistics, as I did in Northern Ghana, then it may be possible to pursue one’s fieldwork with almost improper speed. I was also quick in studying the Ewe seine fishermen—probably mainly because it chanced that my interpreter had been the secretary of a fishing company. But chance plays such a large part in research of this kind, that it is usually difficult to lay down detailed plans in

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advance. Just as I had not thought that two weeks in Northern Ghana would be so rewarding, so I was astonished by the need to devote as long as 3½ years to studying the migrant cocoa-farmers.

But if one cannot plan one's work in advance, how should it be directed? For myself I depend very much on my naïve feelings of *surprise*—holding that the most surprising 'events' are most worth pursuit. To do research is to search anew for ideas one missed last time when formulating the packet of conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious assumptions one carries to the field. To illustrate this point, I list some specimen 'surprises'.

The basic surprise which triggered my prolonged inquiry on the historical development of southern Ghanaian cocoa-farming, was the observation that this had depended on migrant cocoa-farmers who had bought their land, not on small sedentary farmers. Among numerous other surprises were: the 'nice balance' which was maintained by the matrilineal migrants 'between individual control of newly acquired property and its absorption sooner or later into the common property of the descent group';¹ the persistence and dynamism of the migratory process over many decades; the extent of the farmers' development expenditure on roads and bridges; and the fact that everybody, rich and poor, in many of the Akwapim towns, participated in the migration.

I made an expedition to Anlo country, in south-eastern Ghana, to study the famous shallot-growing industry there—perhaps one of the most intensive examples of agriculture in the world, though developed without any assistance from the Agricultural Department. In the event, I was diverted by the surprise I felt over the elaborate organization (especially the accounting systems) of the seine-fishing companies, as well as by the geographical extent of their migration from the Congo (or even Angola) in the south, to Sierra Leone and beyond in the north. Nylon nets, of up to half a mile long, are very expensive items of capital equipment, which are owned by individual capitalists (net-owners) and sustained by a perpetual capital fund (*agbadoho*) which, unlike most other forms of property in Eweland, is (ideally) indivisible on death. Those who are interested in my preliminary findings may fortunately turn to the later work of M. Albert de Surgy.

Knowing that most of the cattle-owning inhabitants of the western Accra Plains lack any proper tradition of pastoralism, although cattle have been reared there for centuries, I had initially been interested in studying the history of the Fulani herdsmen who are now in charge of most of the cattle there. So I was surprised when I found that the employment of such herdsmen is a recent innovation. One of the more curious aspects of the symbiotic

¹ See 'Is Matriliney Doomed in Africa?' by Mary Douglas, included in *Man in Africa*, ed. Mary Douglas and Phyllis Kaberry (London, 1969), p. 132.

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relationship between the kraal-owner and 'his Fulani' is the insistence of the latter on looking after sufficient cattle to enable him to employ a sub-herdsman.

The detailed statistical work on northern Ghanaian cattle-trading resulted from my surprise at finding that there was a very high rate of commercial take-off from the herds in all areas except the north-east. Contrary to popular belief, cattle-rearers (except possibly, though not necessarily, in the north-east) are so little reluctant to sell their stock that premature sale of immature animals is often the real problem. Expecting to study the 'social factors' behind the reluctance to sell, I found myself concluding that, in this context, such factors were irrelevant. The statistics, once assembled, got up their own momentum and led to many further surprises, such as that most cattle-traders comprise a constantly changing section of the population.

My work in Nigerian Hausaland is still in train and I cannot stand back from it sufficiently to report on its numerous major surprises, many of them interrelated. That permanent cultivation of manured farmland is often the preferred agronomic system where land is plentiful, implies that manure is an important scarce factor and that farming is a 'business'. The marked degree of economic inequality in a Katsina village is associated with both permanent cultivation and great seasonal price fluctuations, rather than with 'class stratification'. As for the nineteenth century export trade in tobacco conducted by the farmers of remote Kabakawa, this prompts one to wonder whether most Hausa long-distance trade (*fatauci*) has not always been hamlet-based.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Professor W. F. Stolper for providing me (through the enlightened agency of the Center for Research on Economic Development, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) with remarkable opportunities, over four years, both for pursuing my research on rural Hausaland and for writing up other material which I had gathered when a member of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. On this side of the Atlantic my chief intellectual debt is to Mr Ivor Wilks, whose generous friendship did so much to relieve the isolation of my inter-disciplinary plight. To the University of Ghana, which employed me for eleven years in a research capacity (almost free of teaching duties) my gratitude is unbounded and I greatly value my more recent connexion with the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Ibadan. To my thousands of willing friends and informants in rural Ghana and Nigeria I extend greetings—hoping that the day may come when work of this kind will be of real practical value to them.

Clare Hall, Cambridge
August 1969

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