



**The Chief, the Mine Captain and the Politician: Legitimizing Power in Northern Ghana**

Carola Lentz

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (1998), pp. 46-67.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281998%2968%3A1%3C46%3ATCTMCA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* is currently published by Edinburgh University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/eup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE CHIEF, THE MINE CAPTAIN AND THE POLITICIAN: LEGITIMATING POWER IN NORTHERN GHANA

*Carola Lentz*

The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out. [Proverbs 10: 9, quoted as the bottom line of the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, May 1997]

In a recent article on power, legitimacy and democratisation in contemporary Africa, Michael Schatzberg has set 'power in the West' against 'power in Africa'. 'Power in the West', he contends, is 'essentially transformative, or the ability to get someone to do something', whereas 'power and politics in African society often have more to do with consumption than with transformation' (1993: 446). According to Schatzberg—and similar arguments have been put forward by Jean-François Bayart (1993), Achille Mbembe (1992) and other scholars concerned with the 'post-colony'—African 'power' is inseparably associated with metaphors of 'food' and 'eating', bears a profoundly spiritual face and is characterised by its 'unity and indivisibility'. Behind a thin facade of parliamentary democracy (and in some countries not even that much), so the argument runs, political power in Africa (still?) lacks the essentials of 'Western' constitutional governance, such as broad acceptance of the necessary separation of powers and strict rules of accountability. Hence the African 'moral matrix of legitimate governance' differs more or less radically from the Euro-American paradigm, focusing on images of 'father and family', promises of 'nurture and paternal care' and the premise of a degree of generational rotation of power (Schatzberg, 1993: 450–3).

It is this stark opposition between 'the West' and 'Africa' and the reification of the concept of 'legitimacy' against which I want to argue with a case study of strategies of legitimating power and wealth in Ghana. My first contention is simply that debates on the morality of power and desirable modes of governance are as complex in African states as they are in Europe or the United States. When analysing my northern Ghanaian data, I found, for instance, Max Weber's ideal types of domination and legitimacy or Bailey's (1969) cross-culturally construed distinction between 'normative' and 'pragmatic' political rules quite helpful, across any presumable boundary between 'the West' and 'the rest'. These ideal types are as useful—but also as limited in their ability to grasp the fuzziness of 'real' life—for understanding, for instance, Jerry Rawlings's strategies of legitimation as they are for unpacking, say, Bill Clinton's skilful management of images of good governance. On the other hand, differences within Africa, between political cultures and styles of leadership, may be quite pronounced—and have attracted the attention of political scientists as early as the 1960s.

This brings me to my second contention, namely that Schatzberg and others tend to reify the concept of 'legitimacy', as if 'legitimacy' were a quality to be measured by percentage or degree. Is 'legitimate governance' (or a 'legitimate ruler') something that no longer attracts criticism? Who are the actors to confer 'legitimacy' on, or deny it to, a regime? What if vocal critics regard the ruling Ministers as corrupt (by 'Western' standards of accountability) while their cronies enjoy the spoils of corruption ('eating the power') and the majority are silent? Obviously, I shall not be able to provide ready-made answers to these questions, much less come up with a precise definition of 'legitimacy'. Rather, I suggest that it is more useful to look at 'legitimacy' as a process, a conflict-ridden and open process, in which 'big men' and politicians as well as their audiences and 'judges' intervene. If the construction of any ideal type of 'power in Africa' or of a specifically African 'post-colonial mode of governance' is at all a useful exercise (and there are good grounds to doubt that it is), it must proceed much more cautiously and on a much broader empirical basis than has become fashionable recently. By drawing on elite biographies and other data gathered during several years of fieldwork in northern Ghana, I hope to show, at least, that the analysis of power and legitimacy in Africa (and elsewhere) has a lot to gain from anthropological in-depth studies.

Particularly for the southern part of Ghana, there are a number of excellent anthropological and historical case studies which discuss the relationship between wealth and political office and the concomitant problems of legitimation. In his seminal article on 'Wealth in Asante', Ivor Wilks (1979), for instance, analyses the dominant political philosophy of wealth in nineteenth-century Asante, with its premium on individual achievement and the conversion of economic success into political status and vice versa. And Wilks contends that these nineteenth-century 'ways of looking at money, commerce, land, office, investment, and consumption . . . are still important determinants of behavior in late twentieth century Ghana' (1979: 159). One may ask whether the Asante ideas on the proper relation between economic achievement and political power are relevant mainly within Asante society or within a more broadly defined Akan community, or whether they have informed Ghanaian political culture in general, as Paul Nugent (1995: 19 ff.) seems to suggest. As Michelle Gilbert (1988) shows, the acceptable avenues to status and power are not defined once and for all, but are constantly under debate and must be negotiated, sometimes even after the physical death of the 'big man' in question. In the case studied by Gilbert, the burial of an extraordinarily rich man in Akuapem, a small Akan kingdom, became an arena of contest over the leadership qualities desirable under the system of traditional office and the standards of Christian ethics. The images of 'good' and 'evil' wealth pervading the imagination of Pentecostalist Church members in southern Ghana, on the other hand, rather highlight tensions between individual accumulation and solidarity with the extended family, as Birgit Meyer (1995) argues.

Taken together, these three case studies from southern Ghana alone seem to suggest that a range of somewhat different ideas on wealth, achievement, power and legitimacy exist. One may ask whether studies from the north, with its different political trajectories, would come up with additional images

of 'legitimate power'. My own material from a pre-colonially 'stateless' and relatively poor society, for instance, would seem to challenge the alleged primacy of wealth as a route to power. Yet, however fragmented—regionally, locally and socially—the discourses on wealth, power and legitimacy may be, there is also much interaction and mutual influence between them. Although I would not be quite as confident as Nugent, who asserts that in Ghana 'there is a single political community which shares common sets of symbols and repertoires of ideas' (1995: 34), there has indeed, at least since the 1950s, been a nationwide public debate on the morality of power, albeit with varying degrees of broadness, openness and intensity. It is led by journalists, the media and various commissions of inquiry, but it also embraces much wider circles. In this debate the different images of 'good wealth' and 'good governance', of Akan, Christian or other vintage, are brought into play and criticise and/or reinforce each other.

It is against this background that I want to analyse the example of three 'big men' from northern Ghana, a paramount chief, a mine captain and a politician in the making.<sup>1</sup> Before discussing their strategies of acquiring and legitimating power, however, I want to offer a few more observations on the debate on corruption and the morality of power going on in Ghana at present. I will then present the biographies of the three northern 'big men' and discuss how they combine different registers of power (economic, 'traditional' and 'modern' political) in order to achieve 'bigness'. The rest of the article will explore the skilful management of different registers of legitimacy and moral judgement by the 'big men' themselves and by their various 'judges'.

#### THE RECENT DEBATE ON CORRUPTION AND THE MORALITY OF POWER IN GHANA

In Ghana, public debates on the '(im)morality' of power, the illicit acquisition of wealth through political office and related questions certainly have a *longue durée*. They started, at the very latest, with the findings of the 1966 commission of inquiry into the assets of Nkrumah and his Ministers, and continued with Acheampong's and his military colleagues' critique of nepotism and tribalism under the Busia regime. They reached a climax with Rawlings's harsh 'house-cleaning exercise' in 1979 and 1982, when a number of allegedly corrupt politicians were executed, assets of the conspicuously well-to-do confiscated, and many charges of nepotism and unlawful enrichment levelled. Since the return to constitutional rule and the re-emergence of the private press in 1991, the debate on political power and corruption has regained momentum. One event in particular seems to have triggered off this recent debate. News about the First Lady's acquisition of a jacuzzi, first disseminated by the *Free Press* and later copied and expanded by other privately owned newspapers, stirred up the imagination of the Ghanaian public. (See the ironical picture puzzle by Ghana's best-known caricaturist Ike Essel.) Throughout 1994 many newspaper columnists and countless letters to the editor raised the question of whose money the jacuzzi might have been purchased with. Writers and readers discussed whether it was right for political leaders to display such ostentatious luxury in a country like Ghana where water and electricity supplies are irregular and where the

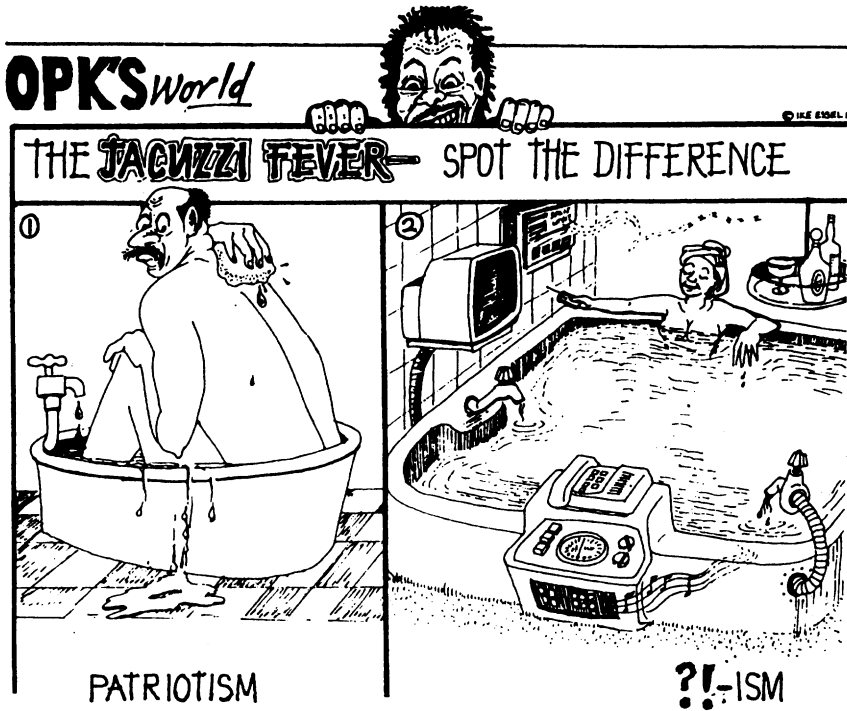


FIG. 1 'Jacuzzi fever', by Ike Essel, from *Uhuru* 3 (1994), 52, by courtesy.

World Bank's structural adjustment policies have apparently increased economic insecurity for a majority of the population. Some commentators, however, also asked whether the habits of consumption of the President's wife were a legitimate object of public scrutiny at all or whether they were rather her own private affair. While these sceptical voices remained a minority, the Minister of Information thought it advisable to try and pass the jacuzzi off as a necessary remedy for the First Lady's delicate health. The average Ghanaian, however, must have remained unconvinced by this explanation because he associates a jacuzzi not with medicine but with a world of unaffordable luxury.

Interestingly, columnists and readers were quick to draw a parallel between Nana Konadu Rawlings's jacuzzi and the legendary golden bed with which Krobo Edusei, a Minister of the Nkrumah government of the 1960s, adorned his bedroom and which caused quite a stir at the time. Incidentally, it was Edusei's wife who allegedly imported the bed.<sup>2</sup> President Rawlings, of all people, referred to this golden bed in a recent interview with an American journalist. The luxurious bedstead, he explained, had once occupied his youthful imagination and awakened his sense of justice, ultimately leading to the 'revolution' of 1979. Precisely in view of the populist rhetoric of this military *coup* which brought Rawlings originally to

power, the recent popular outcry about the scandalous presidential jacuzzi is quite understandable.<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly no coincidence that the debates on corrupt politicians and on the morality of power were apparently triggered off by just a jacuzzi and a bedstead. These objects appear as symbols of bodily vigour and even sexual potency, intimately associated with popular notions of power and wealth, as Bayart (1993) and Mbembe (1992) have observed for the Cameroons (and generalised to other African societies). However, not only the possible sexual connotations are relevant to the jacuzzi case, but also the fact that the accusations were levelled not so much at Rawlings himself as at his wife and later at a number of his Ministers and NDC stalwarts allegedly involved in sex scandals. A strong leader must be able to control his followers, and the authority of a statesman must begin in his own house, a number of columnists and readers have critically remarked when commenting, for instance, on Nana Konadu's influence on politics—the 'Evita' (Peron) syndrome, as one writer called it.<sup>4</sup> A man who is incapable of controlling his wife (and Ministers) is unable to lead a state: this seems to be the implicit meaning. At least in passing I want to draw attention to the evident parallels of this Ghanaian debate with discussions 'in the West', such as the repeated attempts to call US President Bill Clinton's integrity into question by pointing to the allegedly illicit business ventures of his wife. But we should beware of over-interpreting the metaphorical links between political leadership and virility/housekeeping, because the Ghanaian critics usually also point to the sheer 'unconstitutionality' of the First Lady's power, uncontrolled by Cabinet, parliament or the judiciary.

In any case, the public debate on the 'incestuous relationship between wealth and political power' (Nugent, 1995: 279) quickly took on larger dimensions. The Auditor General's report of 1993 and subsequent revelations of illicit practices within the Customs, Excise and Prevention Service and the Cocoa Board confirmed the existence of widespread corruption. Since the end of 1995 the Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) has been investigating some of the most blatant accusations of illegitimate acquisition of wealth raised mainly by the private press against members of government and public servants. The CHRAJ report on its findings, published a year later, confirmed many of the accusations. Probably not least because the presidential and parliamentary elections were round the corner, Rawlings thought it advisable to withdraw the investigated Ministers and public servants from the line of fire, i.e. have them resign their (visible) office. However, in opposition to the CHRAJ's recommendations, no recovery of damages has been demanded from the accused. On the contrary, a government White Paper published after the elections sought to dismiss many of the CHRAJ findings as erroneous—a move which initiated a new round of debate, on the constitutionally enshrined independence of the CHRAJ and on the dubiousness of a President who apparently defends the indefensible, corruption. Meanwhile, the White Paper has been withdrawn and the President misses no opportunity to appeal to all public officers in sensitive positions to declare their assets. They should understand, said Rawlings during a recent swearing-in ceremony for two new Ministers, that 'morality and integrity go beyond mere legalities'

and that 'the public' are perfectly right in seeing the declaration of assets as 'a moral duty . . . , on account of the principles we have stood for since the revolution'.<sup>5</sup>

The investigations of the CHRAJ, whose sessions were diligently covered by the independent press, form part of a larger debate about the moral justification of wealth and power. In an article titled 'Let us all aspire to be rich', for instance, a columnist recently suggested:

We ought to have a new theme song in this country . . . , we need to encourage the individual to aspire, but insist that on their way to the top they develop a responsible attitude to put back into the community by way of taxes and bankrolling development projects in that traditional spirit of improving the lot of those less fortunate. [*Ghanaian Chronicle*, 14–16 March 1994]

The social contract which the columnist demands—acquisition of private wealth only in return for a reasonable contribution to the welfare of the whole community—is enshrined even in the constitution of the Fourth Republic. In a chapter on the 'directive principles of state policy' the constitution prescribes that 'the State shall take steps to eradicate corrupt practices and the abuse of power' and 'ensure that individuals and the private sector bear their fair share of social and national responsibilities, including responsibilities to contribute to the overall development of the country'.<sup>6</sup>

Other commentators express their concern that this commendable social contract may easily be misinterpreted—by 'those less fortunate'—as a licence to criticise all social differentiation. A Ghanaian journalist, for instance, just returned from the United States, sees the progress of his country hampered by Ghanaians' 'instinctive nature' of 'laziness', 'back-biting', 'suspicion' and 'intense jealousy of our fellow countrymen'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, many of my educated and salaried northern friends complain about the 'PhD syndrome', the general 'Pull him Down' attitude towards any outstanding individual (a play on words allegedly coined under the Nkrumah regime).

Ghanaian popular culture, films, dime novels, proverbs, songs are indeed full of stories of devilish wealth and tales of ill-gotten power.<sup>8</sup> Power and affluence are looked upon with a peculiar mixture of admiration and suspicion, and many stories point to conflicts between individual accumulation and egalitarian norms of reciprocity. For many newspaper writers and storytellers, the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, is an inexhaustible fountain of inspiration (see, for instance, the opening quotation of this article). One of the images guiding the popular moral imagination, as expressed in these stories, songs and plays, seems to be a kind of zero-sum conception of non-augmentable worldly goods, the 'image of the limited good', as Foster (1965) once called it. However, there are competing images, and the Akan ideology referred to above, of wealth acquired through individual achievement and legitimated through socially beneficial redistribution, betrays more confidence in the human capacity to create abundance. Whether principally augmentable or limited, the claim to some degree of redistribution is inherent in all popular images of good wealth and legitimate power. Just who is to be included among the beneficiaries of such

redistribution—the immediate family, extended kin, tribesmen or the ‘less fortunate’ in general—is, however, a controversial question. Similarly, there is near-unanimity that political power built upon previously acquired wealth is not *per se* wrong, although—as will be shown in my case study—people may hold different convictions whether wealth is an indispensable and/or a sufficient qualification for office-holders. Wealth acquired through public office, however, is generally regarded as illegitimate.

Side by side, and partly intertwined with the debate on wealth and power, there is also increasingly vociferous concern about the proper relationship between the different registers of power, in particular between ‘traditional office’ and ‘modern politics’. As I shall explain in greater detail below, links between these two registers of power are manifold and inevitable on a pragmatic level. Nevertheless, as far as normative rules—even enshrined in the constitution—are concerned, those links are strongly criticised. When in early 1996 the Rawlings government proposed an amendment of the constitution, intending to allow chiefs to participate actively in party politics, there was a public outcry that the move would be ‘inimical to the prestige, honour and the very survival of the institution of chieftaincy’.<sup>9</sup> Chiefs, it was argued unanimously by the various regional (and the national) houses of chiefs, as well as by many ordinary Ghanaians, must guarantee the unity of their respective communities and should not dabble in active partisan politics. Their status is regarded as guaranteed by ‘custom’, not by the grace of the government of the day, hence they should not risk their integrity by bending to the wishes of party politicians. This normative separation of ‘politics’ and ‘tradition’ dates back to the colonial period but has become entrenched in popular concepts of legitimate power, just as the multiple trade-offs between political office and economic gain are regarded with much scepticism.

#### THE CASE STUDIES

It is against the background of these earlier Ghanaian debates on political power, wealth and traditional office that I want to present the cases of three ‘big men’ from the north: a paramount chief, a mine captain and a politician in the making. Evidently, public approval and its counterpart—strategies of legitimation—are not equally central to all these positions. The would-be parliamentarian depends on a sufficient number of votes, whereas the chief, once in power, can outlive popular discontent—at least in the north, where, once appointed, most chiefs rule until death, and official procedures of ‘destoolment’ are unusual if not unknown. But all three men strive to invest themselves with some measure of legitimacy. And the very question of just how ‘big’ they can become seems to depend not least on some degree of acceptance by their cronies and other ‘big men’ as well as by a wider public.

Before offering portraits of these powerful men, however, I should make some brief remarks on terminology, approach and methodology. Firstly, classifying chief, mine captain and politician alike as ‘big men’ means that I use the term in a heuristic fashion, and not within the confines of the evolutionary matrix of ‘rich man’, ‘big man’ and ‘chief’ once developed by Marshall Sahlins (1963). I prefer to use the term loosely, much like the



ordinary Ghanaian who may call any person of substance a 'big man'.<sup>10</sup> In many of the Ghanaian languages the term which would translate as 'big man' can denote positions of both ascribed and achieved status. In Dagara and other Gur languages spoken in the north, for instance, the term *nibere* ('big' or 'strong' men) can be applied to lineage elders, wealthy peasants and persons in government alike. Even the term *naa*, 'chief', at present applied to holders of a traditional office, was once used in a much broader sense of wealthy, influential persons.<sup>11</sup>

It is perhaps also necessary to emphasise that by selecting the case of a chief, a mine captain and a politician I do not intend to reify three ideal types of human activity, namely the traditional, the economic and the political. On the contrary, I want to explore the multiple linkages between these different fields of actions. How do the 'big men' combine different registers of power, and to what extent do they (and their critics) distinguish between them? Precisely for an exploration of the links and subtle distinctions between different avenues to power and legitimacy, it seems useful to take examples of 'big men' who do indeed present themselves as different 'types'.

Secondly, my focus on strategies of legitimation emphasises the importance of individual agency. But this focus does not mean reducing everything to a Machiavellian calculus. Rather, I am interested in the potential tensions between personal moral convictions and public expectations, between strategies of building up power and claims of the moral discourse.

Thirdly, on methodology: much of my analysis is centred on the big men's 'public selves', as presented towards me (and others around) both in action and in interviews. Some of the interview situations were fairly public; in others the 'big men' attempted to 'take me into their confidence' and convince me of their own or their enemies' 'true aspirations'. In any case, the self-presentations were certainly influenced, to a certain degree, not only by the various local and national images of 'good wealth' and 'legitimate Power' but also by these men's anticipation of my potentially different yardstick of power and morals and by the fact that I am a woman. This is why in addition to the 'public transcripts', the various public images which the 'big men' present, I shall also draw on 'hidden transcripts' and 'offstage' comments, to use James Scott's (1990) metaphor. However, there is a serious drawback to the richness in detail and depth of the following case studies which I have to mention finally, namely that two of the three 'big men', the 'chief' and the 'politician', explicitly asked me not to mention their names in any publication. This means not only that I have had to change the names of persons and most places, but also that I have had to omit some of the too obviously identifying aspects of their biographies and present positions.

### *The chief*

Dr Michael Babanga, or, more formally, Naa Kasim Naateryel Abingya VI, is the paramount chief of a small traditional area in the north, a chiefdom established by the British colonial authorities early this century. When attending primary and middle school in his home village in the 1950s, Michael grew into serving as personal secretary to his father, the then incumbent—an apprenticeship of sorts, Dr Babanga now thinks, which familiarised him with the intricate network of local feuds and alliances. Like

many other northern chiefs' sons and future members of the regional elite, he passed through Tamale Government Secondary School. On a scholarship of the Catholic Church he then studied economics in Spain and started working with a Spanish bank. Later he set himself up as a business consultant, in charge, among other things, of some Spanish–Ghanaian ventures. He finally returned to Ghana in the mid-1980s, having triumphed over four other contestants for the 'skin' of his natal village, the chiefly office which had become vacant upon the death of the last incumbent, Michael's uncle.

Dr Babanga, a handsome and affable man in his early 50s, likes to present himself as a 'modern chief', as he expresses it. He prides himself on being one of the most highly educated among all northern chiefs and a successful 'ambassador of development' who has attracted new development projects for his people and established a cultural festival. He delights in showing proof of his thorough knowledge of 'custom' and nonetheless forgoing cumbersome ceremonial whenever opportune—for instance, when foreign visitors like myself and my group of students pay the obligatory courtesy call.

'Chiefs are the true politicians,' Dr Babanga believes, caring for the well-being of their people and enjoying more 'authority' than any district secretary or member of parliament—provided, of course, their installation was duly recognised by government, a prerequisite of chiefly status since colonial times. Since he became paramount chief Dr Babanga has indeed accumulated a number of political and managerial positions, some of them honorary, others with lucrative reimbursement of expenses. He sits, among other things, on the boards of directors of the local secondary school, the local hospital and the Accra-based corporation producing one of Ghana's daily newspapers. He is a member of the Regional Co-ordinating Council, the Regional House of Chiefs and the standing committee of the National House of Chiefs. He was a government nominee to the 1991 Consultative Assembly drawing up the constitution of the Fourth Republic. Later he was elected to the Council of State and given an even more prominent role in the National House of Chiefs. Similarly, Dr Babanga's uncle, who preceded him on the skin, sat on the board of directors of the State Gold Mining Corporation, was chairman of the Accra Prisons Council and even served, for several months, in Rawlings's PNDC government.

It is therefore not surprising that critics accuse Dr Babanga of being interested in chieftaincy only as a stepping stone to a political career. Dr Babanga, on the other hand, declares that he never aspired to become chief. He insists that it was the binding will of his predecessor and the decision of the family elders which virtually forced the office upon him. There are 'no gains' in chieftaincy, he complained when talking to me first in 1989; on the contrary, it meant 'sacrificing' one's personal future for the good of the family and the people. A few years later, however, after attaining ever higher and more lucrative positions in the political hierarchy, he spends as much time in Accra and Kumasi as in his village and makes no attempt to hide the fact that he thoroughly enjoys the prestige as well as the tangible fringe benefits which the discharge of his 'duties' entails.

Dr Babanga's opponents allege that he is maintained in office thanks to the backing of the Rawlings government, which needs the support of compliant chiefs and therefore prefers to boost candidates with little clout of their own.

Dr Babanga, of course, rejects any such allegation and refers to the power of 'tradition' which allowed him to get the better of his rivals. That he is the rightful heir to the local 'skin' has been amply confirmed, he believes, by misfortune and death afflicting his adversaries, which he attributes to the magical powers surrounding the chiefly office, sanctioned by an oath of the earth priest. Being a member of the Catholic Church and a regular churchgoer, he nevertheless narrates freely how he had to obtain spiritual protection from specialists as far away as Burkina Faso for himself and his wives and children in order to counteract the manifold attacks of envious subjects and fellow chiefs. And in his account of a violent clash, some years back, between his supporters and one of the contestants' followers, he boasts that his 'house people' far outnumbered their adversaries and had 'beaten them proper'—a story which appeals to the warrior qualities that were one of the major local avenues to 'bigness' in pre-colonial times.

### *The mine captain*

Lambert Dagarti is a mine captain at Ashanti Goldfields Corporation in Obuasi.<sup>12</sup> An impressive-looking man of strong build in his late 50s, speaking in a loud voice and often roaring with laughter, Lambert immediately gives the impression of someone used to command and to respect. For our first interview he fetched me and my assistant from our hotel rather than our having to look him up at his house. In a cortege of two cars, we were taken on a whirlwind tour of restaurants and bars, where we were treated to an assortment of beers and fried chicken, each portion costing at least as much as a quarter of an ordinary worker's monthly pay cheque. After this we passed through one of Obuasi's popular quarters, full of miners and migrants, with Lambert commenting, 'Everybody knows me here', and then drove to a village outside Obuasi, where he pointed to his new house under construction. Eventually we arrived at his lavishly furnished house, in an AGC-owned housing complex for senior staff, situated on a hill overlooking the mineworkers' barracks. But only after a further round of beers and display of video and other hi-fi installations did Lambert finally allow us to interview him, proceeding to a lengthy statement about his career.

In his youth, Lambert told us, he helped on his father's farm in a Dagara village in the north-west, and never went to school. Impressed by the money and clothes which other boys in the village brought home from work in the south, he too decided to set out for the mines. In 1950 he went to Bibiani, later to Tarkwa, and finally to Obuasi, eventually working his way up from an unskilled shovel boy to a machine driver and blastman. It was at this point, Lambert explained, that he acquired his new name. One of the white shift bosses, Lambert by name, 'was a hard worker, and I too was a hard worker, so this man observed my work and said that I was just like him and gave me the name Lambert . . . and made me a foreman'. At a night school organised by the mineworkers themselves, Lambert learnt to read and write, and after attending a company-sponsored course he was promoted to the position of shift boss and finally mine captain, the highest and best paid underground job (except for that of underground manager, a position reserved until recently for expatriates).

Lambert proudly presents himself as a self-made man who has achieved his status through hard work and intelligence, 'working seriously', as he expresses it. The grand introduction and the ease of Lambert's subsequent dealings with me also suggest a much more flexible handling of ethnic boundaries than was the case with most other Dagara mineworkers. Because of his exposed position Lambert had a great deal of intercourse with the white expatriate management and boasted of many white visitors and a trip to Europe. However, Lambert's fluent relations with whites cannot gloss over a strong undercurrent of racial bias within mine society. In Obuasi and other mining towns a certain kind of ethnic differentiation exists between southern surface employees and northern underground workers. In addition, a sizeable group of white expatriates continues to occupy the top levels of the mine hierarchy. It is within this matrix of black/white and northern/southern relations, interlaced with conflicts between order-givers and order-takers, that Lambert Dagarti plays the role of an ethnic broker and an intermediary between capital and labour. And it is in this context that his home ties come to play an important role.

On the one hand, Lambert Dagarti is useful to the company in that he quite visibly represents a living 'African' success story, demonstrating the potential for black discipline and toil. At the same time, he plays the role of an overseer, and he is able to use his intimacy with the Dagara language and 'way of life' to appease underground workers in conflicts between management and labour. On the other hand, Lambert is a genuinely popular figure, known to stand up for the interests of the miners. During strikes, for instance, he has often supported the workers' demands, and in cases of gold theft he has been known to vouch for the accused.

How, precisely, all this benefited Lambert materially is difficult to establish. Not surprisingly, there are many rumours put about by envious persons and by admirers that his affluence is based partly on his own involvement in gold theft. But the management has not considered it advisable to enquire into the allegations and they have not brought him into disrepute with the miners. In the first place, workers hardly consider gold theft 'wrong'. And secondly, potential critics seem to be appeased by Lambert's ostentatious redistribution of part of his income.

Much of Lambert's capacity to manoeuvre between ethnic boundaries and his fluent relations with southern and clerical staff and with northern underground workers alike is based on his public demonstrations of inter-ethnic comradeship. Lambert attends local funerals, for instance, clad in Asante cloth, and few are those who do not believe that he keeps a local Adansi mistress. During the 1979 electoral campaign, instead of supporting the northerner Dr Limann, Lambert canvassed for the Asante presidential candidate of the Popular Front Party. At the same time, his dictum that 'you should never deny what you are' is a daily lived reality. He frequently wears the northern smock, insisted on giving the interview in his maternal language, and proudly showed us a video of *benda* dances which his son had taken at a funeral in his natal Dagara village. His close home ties and annual trips to the village, where his second wife lives, make him the natural port of call for a wide circle of friends and relatives who come to Obuasi in search of work and advice. And he is also the patron of the Dagarti Association in

Obuasi, assisting members in bereavement or other personal crises and aiming at keeping Dagara culture alive. In many ways Lambert Dagarti plays the role of a 'chief' for the local Dagara migrant community.

Let me now add a postscript to this portrait, which is based on interviews in 1988 and 1990. When I last visited Lambert, in 1994, he was pensioned and had returned to the north. He lets his newly built house in Obuasi at quite a lucrative rent to expatriate mine managers, and visits Obuasi from time to time in order to see his sons and draw his pension. But he emphasises that he has become disenchanted with life in Obuasi and now enjoys 'life in the north' far more. He has built a big house in his natal village and another in the regional capital, Wa, in which he lives and from which he operates a hotel and bar, Lambert's Hotel—a northern replica of the bright lights of Obuasi, so to speak. Politically, too, his allegiance has shifted from the 'south' to the 'north', from the Asante-dominated Popular Front Party (in 1992 it became the NPP, New Patriotic Party) which he once supported to the People's National Convention, the successor to the party which in 1979 had won the elections with the northerner Dr Limann and which, in the 1992 elections, was again the only party to field a northerner as presidential candidate. 'I have to support my own people,' Lambert explained, and during my visit to his new residence in Wa a good number of younger visitors from his village and surrounding settlements came in 'to greet' him, seeking his political advice and financial support.

### *The politician in the making*

I was suffering from a severe attack of malaria when I first met Dr Samson, the director of a regional hospital and a very popular doctor known to have saved many people's lives. Self-medication had aggravated my condition, and my worried host called Dr Samson in to have a look at me. A very busy man, he came late in the evening and, after examining me briefly, lectured me severely. How could I dare to medicate myself? Did I believe there were no experienced Ghanaian doctors? And so forth. And in all our subsequent encounters Dr Samson emphasised that he considered his most important quality to be as a highly qualified, responsible and successful professional.

Like Dr Babanga, Dr Samson went through the government secondary school in Tamale after completing his primary and middle school education near his natal village. Babanga and Samson were even classmates in Tamale, and Samson, too, studied in Europe on a diocesan scholarship. On returning to Ghana in 1978 he insisted on being posted to his home region although he had been offered a post in a renowned hospital in Accra. But he felt and still feels under a moral obligation to repay the educational privileges he enjoyed by means of his medical services to those whose toil enabled him to go through primary and secondary school. He believes in his and other professionals' duty not only to assist their immediate kin but to contribute more generally to local 'development' by 'educating' and 'changing the mentality' of 'our unfortunate ones' as well as by 'lobbying for a bigger share of the national cake' for them. And it is in this spirit that shortly after his return to Ghana he formed, with other educated migrants from his home region, a 'youth and development association'.<sup>13</sup>

Dr Samson quickly became an 'opinion leader', as he and others term it, whose advice and support are much sought. He was invited to join the Freemasons and numerous clubs such as the local hunting society, the tennis club and the Tamale Secondary School Old Boys' Association. Government appointed him, among other things, a member of the Regional Consultative Council and a member of the District Assembly of his home district, which then elected him its president and, in 1991, its representative on the Consultative Assembly drawing up the new constitution. With the return to party politics in 1992 Dr Samson joined the People's National Convention (PNC), Dr Limann's party, which Lambert Dagarti, too, now supports. When asked why he chose to join the PNC, Dr Samson pointed to the Nkrumahist tradition of the party, to whose political philosophy of African socialism he had felt attracted since his student days. He was selected as the party's parliamentary candidate in his home area, but in the end could not put his popularity to the test because the PNC and other opposition parties accused the Rawlings government of rigging the presidential elections and withdrew from the parliamentaries.

Although disillusioned by the meagre 30 per cent which his party scored in the presidentials in his constituency, Dr Samson considered standing again in 1996. He regards his involvement in politics as an extension of his commitment to the 'development' of his home region. 'Without political power,' he explains, 'you cannot achieve anything in Africa . . . You need politicians to lobby for you.' He feels that professionals of 'integrity' like himself should take the risk of entering the political arena instead of just criticising the opportunism and ineptitude of the erstwhile local teachers-turned-politicians who, according to Samson, know little of national politics and merely see public office as an economically lucrative sinecure. But 'politics is a dirty game', as Dr Samson is well aware, and a doctoral degree, breadth of knowledge and personal morality alone cannot attract the necessary votes. Dr Samson and many of his educated friends blame 'money', which the opposition parties, particularly the PNC, did not have in abundance, for the electoral victory of Rawlings's party. Conversely, most ordinary voters impute self-interest and ruthless tactics in the pursuit of power to politicians in general. And therefore Dr Samson's several cars, his various associational activities, his having once been praised by Rawlings as a dedicated doctor, his government-sponsored medical treatment in Britain, and so forth, have set tongues wagging.

Again, let me add a postscript, based on conversations with Dr Samson shortly after the elections of December 1996 during which he had indeed again offered himself as parliamentary candidate, standing against two contestants of the New Patriotic Party and Rawlings's NDC. Dr Samson had mounted a busy campaign, touring all the villages of his constituency, in spite of the lack of financial support from his party and the limited personal finances at his disposal. This effort and his overall popularity in the region certainly contributed to the fact that he was at least able to secure well over 25 per cent of the votes in the parliamentaries, whereas in the presidentials his party scored even less than in 1992, a meagre 11 per cent. 'I am not shocked, but I am disappointed', Dr Samson commented on his recent defeat. In his view it was still mainly 'money', as well as intimidation by

many chiefs and ultimately the lack of education, which made people decide for the NDC. 'People in the north were not voting from conscience or principle but because they had been directed . . . many of them don't understand the whole issue,' Samson argued. 'Development of people' and not only of the infrastructure should therefore be the major task at hand. Asked whether he would not have achieved more for development had he joined the ruling party and made it into parliament, Dr Samson insisted that, since he did not agree with 'certain things' the party did, he could scarcely join it. 'I wouldn't want to do things against my own conscience.' 'Not all of us can belong to the ruling party,' he added. 'Somebody must be in opposition to keep the government on its toes.' But now that he has not been elected, he wants to concentrate on his professional career and open a private clinic, not least, perhaps, in order to generate enough funds for a more successful election campaign in the future.

#### AVENUES TO 'BIGNESS'

Summarising the three men's justification of their status and aspirations, we could state that Dr Samson appeals to the ethics of 'development' and his professional qualification, Lambert Dagarti underlines achievement through 'hard work' and a status acquired through his leadership abilities, and the paramount chief Dr Babanga, finally, invokes mainly 'tradition'. At first sight, these patterns seem to bear a striking resemblance to Max Weber's (1921) three ideal types of domination and legitimacy, traditional, charismatic and rational-legal. While the chief could be assigned to the traditional-patrimonial mode of domination, the politician and the mine captain could be related to rational-bureaucratic rule. And in all three figures we can detect some element of charisma. However, contrary to Weber's grand historical model of a gradual shift from 'traditional' to 'rational-legal' domination, in contemporary Ghana and other African (and many non-African) countries these different types of authority and legitimacy coexist and intersect. On closer examination we find that the three 'big men'—and this holds for Ghanaian chiefs, politicians and entrepreneurs in general—are the more powerful the better they are able to combine their stakes in different fields of action and to manoeuvre with different registers of legitimacy. Nevertheless, the 'big men' as well as the ordinary Ghanaian distinguish between 'traditional' and 'modern' political office as well as between 'politics' and 'economic ventures', although the borderlines tend to become rather blurred. In order to become truly 'big', the aspiring person must be able to convert social into economic and political 'capital', both 'traditional' and 'modern' (and vice versa) as well as to skilfully craft their public image(s) by foregrounding one or the other field of action, according to context.

To be eligible 'according to custom', for instance, is not sufficient for becoming a paramount chief. In order to secure the kingmakers' support the contestant usually needs have some means at his disposal and/or an influential position in government. The kingmakers need to nurture definite hopes that the future chief will bring tangible benefits for themselves and the family if they are to prefer a particular candidate to the other contestants. In addition, the chief-to-be may often have to lobby in order to obtain the

government recognition without which his traditional appointment would remain inconsequential. Once in office, the chief must skilfully combine the use of his 'traditional' right of sanction against opponents with the manufacture of popular approval by 'delivering the goods'. That the 'traditional' foundations of chiefly status formerly included the ability to exert physical force—in most parts of the north, chiefs were also powerful warriors—is borne out by Naa Kasim Naateryel's vivid account of his followers 'beating up' his contestants' clients. But this rather archaic display of power is usually subdued by more subtle methods of controlling one's subjects. And if popularity with the local constituency is coupled with education and political adroitness, chieftaincy can indeed become a stepping stone to a political position, as the careers of Dr Babanga and many other chiefs in Ghana show. Both 'modern' and 'traditional' political weight can, in turn, be an invaluable asset in economic ventures.

Dr Babanga, for instance, is said to have recommended his sub-chiefs, in no uncertain terms in the run-up to the elections of 1992 and 1996, ensure that their villages voted for Rawlings's NDC. It is not far-fetched to assume that the NDC parliamentarians of the area, for their part, felt obliged to support Dr Babanga's candidature to the Council of State—a position which guarantees him quite lucrative allowances for transport, accommodation and subsistence during sessions, in addition to a host of other fringe benefits. This income, in turn, is invested in generosity to sub-chiefs and other followers, splendid festivals and ostentatious hospitality, which contribute towards Dr Babanga's popularity as paramount chief.

Similarly, the mine captain's power results from the mutual reinforcement of his position in the company's chain of command and in ethno-regional networks. His popularity among his tribesmen and other northern workers and their loyalty to him are an essential bargaining chip *vis-à-vis* the company. Vice versa, his influence in his ethnic community is partly based on his authority in the mine hierarchy. Material benefits accruing from both sets of relations can be invested in independent economic projects which, in turn, help to bolster the 'big man' status by creating jobs and income to be redistributed among clients. Lambert Dagarti, for instance, ran several taxis in Obuasi as well as a large farm and a grain mill in his home village, and the hotel-cum-bar in Wa. In addition, as mentioned above, he prides himself on having used his popularity politically, too, by promising in the 1979 elections to bring the northern community of Obuasi to vote *en bloc* for the PFP Asante presidential candidate and later supporting the PNC, both financially and by word of mouth.

The case of Dr Samson is instructive in that it points to the difficulty of basing a political career on professional qualification, moral integrity and social prestige alone. Dr Samson asserted that he had refrained from capitalising on clan allegiances and close connections with the paramount chief in his electoral campaigns, and quite obviously he had few tangible favours to distribute—except the promise of 'clean politics'. His supporters attributed his defeat to the factors of 'money', intimidation and the advantages of incumbency to the ruling party. But, however one may judge the political maturity of the voters, it is also undeniable that Dr Samson was



not able to transform his professional and social standing into political weight.

In any case, many 'big man' biographies in Ghana demonstrate the convertibility and complementarity of 'traditional' and 'modern' political office, and of business and politics. When analysing my material I was initially tempted to apply Bayart's (1993) metaphor of 'straddling' which he regards as the quintessential strategy in African societies for accumulating wealth and political power. He therefore characterises the dominant elites as 'straddling classes'. In the same vein Médard (1992) adapts Sahlins's 'big man' model to contemporary African realities, incorporating it into his concept of the 'neopatrimonial state'. However, on closer inspection the image of 'straddling' entails the danger of reifying different fields of action. Do the actors themselves see their biographies as a constant attempt to 'straddle' economy and politics? Or is it rather the European scholar who draws these distinctions? I have no conclusive answer to these questions, but on the basis of my material it seems more adequate to speak of the 'combination' and 'complementarity' of different registers of power than of the 'straddling' of different spheres. But even if we start from the assumption of a single more or less continuous field of action, there are, as mentioned above, undeniably conceptual distinctions which my Ghanaian interlocutors drew between 'traditional' and 'modern' political office as well as between politics and business.<sup>14</sup> In the remaining section I would like to look at these distinctions and their role for strategies of legitimation. Are the pragmatic avenues to power regarded as legitimate or must they be concealed? How do the 'big men' present themselves and on what grounds is their 'integrity' judged by their followers, by other members of the elite and by the general public?

#### STRATEGIES OF LEGITIMATION AND GROUNDS OF MORAL JUDGEMENT

If the avenues to 'bigness' are characterised by the astute combination of different registers of power, economic and political, so are the strategies of legitimation. As a rule, there seems to be one pattern or 'role image', corresponding with the current major field of action of the 'big man' in question, which is being foregrounded while others are called upon whenever useful. A chief like Dr Babanga, for instance, presents himself first and foremost as a 'traditional ruler', duly installed according to 'custom' and protected by magical powers. But whenever necessary—for example, during a visit of foreign dignitaries or state officials—he can also point to his training as an economist or his role as a promoter of development. Similarly, the mine captain presents himself mainly as a 'hard worker', but he also draws artfully on a broader range of legitimating strategies, such as physical strength, generosity, leadership abilities, seniority, and so forth. The most straightforward and nearly one-dimensional strategy of legitimation among the three cases presented here was that of the politician-in-the-making. He almost exclusively invoked his education, professionalism and dedication to work for the good of his constituency. But other politicians in Ghana, of course, present a more colourful variety of legitimating assets, including traditional titles and economic wealth.

There is a whole repertoire of techniques by which the 'big men' stage their simultaneous involvement in different social and political fields and skilfully foreground the contextually most relevant element of legitimacy. For instance, the usual recital of the *curriculum vitae* and the various associational activities of the 'big men' during public functions which they chair or otherwise participate in is crafted according to the particular occasion and aim. One may also think here of the very conscious use of the language of dress. Take the example of politicians who display wealth and closeness to 'traditional office' by deliberately sporting luxurious chiefly attire in certain gatherings while others prefer the more humble and official 'political suit'; or of Naa Kasim who makes a conscious statement about his versatility in northern and southern traditions by ostentatiously wearing a northern smock sewn from Asante *kente* cloth during an official reception for members of the Council of State. What clothes express at public gatherings is often achieved in face-to-face encounters by the notorious presentation of photo albums which witness to the 'big man's' many other lives past and present.

How are the strategies of legitimation regarded by fellow 'big men' and by the ubiquitous 'small boys'? The first observation to make in this regard is that people take cognisance of the different registers of legitimacy and use them, depending on the specific context and the claims they want to make on the 'big men'. As is to be expected, the judgements differ, depending on the type of relationship to the 'big man'. There exist, so to speak, different 'moral communities'—ranging from the family and wider relations of the 'big man' in question, his ethnic and regional constituencies, colleagues and former classmates to a wider critical public and the independent press mentioned above. In part, these communities (or publics) overlap and share similar images of legitimate power and wealth, but, in part, they will evaluate the 'big men' according to somewhat different expectations.

The chief's immediate family and his cronies, for instance, expect to be among the first to benefit from his rule. If the chief falls short of expectations, they will usually voice their criticism 'off-stage' only. Even if they harbour doubts about his disinterestedness and 'traditional' legitimacy, they will hardly make them public. By contrast, the chief's contestants, who had aspired to the office in vain, will miss no opportunity to blame him for contravening 'custom' by, for instance, having ousted senior candidates and failed to respect the family elders' decision. In Dr Babanga's case, some aggrieved village chiefs accuse him of going 'against tradition' by arrogating to himself the right to remove subordinate chiefs. And while the beneficiaries of the chief's various cultural and infrastructural projects praise him for bringing 'development', other subjects complain of the very lack of developmental achievements and of the exaction of presents, court fees and development levies. Dr Babanga's former classmates and fellow students from his home area initially found it difficult to understand why he was interested in becoming paramount chief—an office which they considered relatively unrewarding and replete with rather cumbersome ceremonial, tying the incumbent to long periods of residence in a dusty northern village without the comforts of urban life. Now, perhaps somewhat envious of his recent political exploits, they insinuate that it may have been

business problems that caused him to leave Spain and seek a new fortune in Ghana. One of the major criticisms launched by the local youth and development association activists, on the other hand, is Dr Babanga's partisan stance towards the ruling government. And so on and so forth. The forum of such criticism is, however, first and foremost a local one. Whoever publicises such critical remarks outside this rather restricted 'moral community' risks being accused of washing dirty linen in public. On the other hand, surreptitiously writing a critical article or letter to the editor in the press (expressing, for instance, the writer's 'disgust' with the chief's 'utter display of gaping sycophancy' during a visit of the President)—as has happened in Dr Babanga's case several times—can strengthen the position of the internal critics.

I could list similar allegations, outright accusations and, on the other hand, justifications of each 'big man'. Many of Dr Samson's more distant relatives, for instance, accuse him of not according them preferential treatment when they come to the regional hospital, letting them wait instead like any ordinary patient. Vice versa, a professional like Dr Samson strongly disapproves of Lambert Dagarti's practice of regarding kinship and clientship as just as important as education and training in the allocation of jobs. All these judgements and the respective justifications appeal to moral values. But it is also clear that different values are being invoked, according to the interests of the judge and the situation in which judgement is pronounced. Furthermore, proclaiming the (im)morality of the 'big man' may well be just part of the critics' own political strategies. There seems to be no 'interest-free' moral criticism, or at least the 'big men' usually repudiate moral criticism by pointing to its hidden agenda.

Unravelling strategies of legitimation and linking moral judgements with underlying interests and political calculations, as I have just attempted to do, opens up a number of questions. For instance, does this approach imply the assumption that there are no widely shared moral convictions at all? If the avenues to 'bigness' necessarily include 'immoral' ways, are these condoned or sanctioned under certain rules? Or does 'anything go', because one can always find an element of justification and, on the other hand, something to criticise? The discourses on the legitimacy of power and wealth seem to be fragmented, not only because of the different interests of the critics that come into play, but also because they invoke different normative grounds, such as the constitution, the law and judicial enforcement, on the one hand, or, on the other, religious commandments or some otherwise founded image of 'justice'. I can offer only tentative answers here, on the limited basis of my observations in Ghana.

The diversity and even fragmentation of the discourses on legitimacy notwithstanding, there seems to exist something like a common 'grammar', metaphorically speaking, which regulates the on-going debates on 'bigness', morality and interest—a 'grammar' to which the powerful and their critics both subscribe at least to a certain degree. One element of this 'grammar' seems to be the common ground of a general norm of redistribution. Whether invoking religion, constitutionality or 'natural justice', the legitimation of all power and wealth hinges on providing some measure of redistribution and

reciprocity. The kind and amount of 'goods to be delivered' and the question of who precisely is to benefit, however, remain highly controversial.

Secondly, the strategies of legitimation and images of legitimacy seem to differ according to the major field of action in which the 'big man' operates. This is particularly true of the holders of 'traditional office'. There exists a widely shared image of a 'good chief', centred on the notion of a 'traditional ruler', just, generous and non-partisan. The chief may boast of many additional qualities, but being installed and reigning 'according to tradition' are essential to his legitimacy. The question of what precisely the truly traditional procedures of installation and the adequate performance of the office consist of can be intensely debated. But critics and defenders alike insist on 'tradition' as the linchpin of the chief's legitimacy. Notions of a 'good politician' and a 'good entrepreneur', however, seem to be more fuzzy. Nevertheless, there are certain elements which inevitably will be invoked: judgements on the mine captain, for instance, refer, other merits notwithstanding, to his workmanship and fairness as a superior; judgements on the politician ask whether he is educated and vocal enough to defend the interests of his constituency in the national arena and able to 'deliver the goods'. Whether these elements add up to widely shared role models, as in the case of the chief, is an open question.<sup>15</sup> But at least the images of the 'good chief' and, to a certain degree, of the 'good politician' have clear contours and, more important, deny the strategies of 'combination' which are necessary on the avenue to 'bigness'.

There is, then, a certain tension. On the one hand, all my interlocutors (and many Ghanaians in general) would acknowledge that achieving power necessarily involves pragmatic strategies of combining different fields of action—converting social and economic into political 'capital', complementing business and politics as well as 'traditional' and 'modern' political office. On the other hand, the strategies of legitimation tend to downplay these linkages because they are regarded as potentially immoral. Pragmatic and normative rules, to draw on Bailey's (1969) analysis of the political game, are distinct—and necessarily so, as I would argue, because it is this tension which keeps the moral debate on power alive.

To conclude, let me relate these observations to the introductory critique of Schatzberg's approach. Is the 'grammar' of the moral debate on power in Ghana which I tried to flesh out not ultimately the same thing as Schatzberg's African 'moral matrix of legitimate governance'? Yes and no. Yes, if 'matrix' is not defined as a firm set of norms but understood as a rather flexible and historically variable framework of rules within which the contestation over 'bigness' and legitimacy takes place. No, because the complexity of the cases presented above shows how difficult it is to come up with a general 'matrix' even for a single society. I don't believe that it will be possible to distill such a 'matrix' for the whole of the African continent (or, worse, an African matrix in opposition to 'the West'). Instead of searching for an African matrix of legitimate power, we should study strategies of legitimation and look at 'legitimacy' as a process in which various actors and audiences (and their respective notions of 'good governance' or 'legitimate wealth') intervene. It will need a number of

case studies, well grounded in the richness of real political life, and a more intensive debate between historians, anthropologists and political scientists, in order to come up with useful generalisations on 'power' and 'legitimacy' in Africa which go beyond the banal.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A first version of this article was presented at the third biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropology in Oslo, in June 1994, the overall theme of which was 'Morality and Power'. I am grateful to Emmanuel Akyeampong, Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Claude Galey, Adam Kuper, Murray Last, Paul Nugent and Dorothea Schulz for their comments.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more broadly based study of a northern educated elite see Lentz (1994).

<sup>2</sup> For more details see Jones (1976), chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive and well written analysis of the ideologies and history of the 'revolution' and subsequent military regime of Rawlings see Nugent (1995).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Charles Wereko Brobbey's column in the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 22-4 May 1995, and letters to the editor in the 12-14 June 1995 issue.

<sup>5</sup> *West Africa*, 21-7 April 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Ghana (1992), chapter 6, articles 35 (8) and 36 (2c). See Nugent (1995), introduction and chapter 1 on the political history of this 'social contract'.

<sup>7</sup> *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 17-20 March 1994.

<sup>8</sup> For an early description of this phenomenon see Jahoda (1966); for a recent analysis, Meyer (1995).

<sup>9</sup> *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 16-19 May 1996.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the illuminating ironic portrayal of the 'big man' by Ebow Daniel (1993: 38-40); see Price (1974) for an early description of the Ghanaian 'big man-small boys' syndrome in public institutions.

<sup>11</sup> There are interesting parallels with the Asante title *oberempon*; see Wilks (1993: 139-44).

<sup>12</sup> Parts of the following portrait have been published in Lentz and Erlmann (1988), to which the reader is also referred for more background information on the gold mines and the history of Dagara migrants to the mines.

<sup>13</sup> For details of the history and agenda of youth associations in northern Ghana see Lentz (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Bayart, Médard and others have mainly discussed the links between political office and entrepreneurship, paying much less attention to the relationship between 'traditional' and 'modern' political office. The latter has been studied by a number of historians and anthropologists. For an instructive example from Nigeria of the multiple conversions of 'modern' and 'traditional' political office see Peel (1983); for northern Benin, Bierschenk (1993). For northern Ghana see the thorough account of the historical fusion of 'traditional' chiefly and 'modern' educated elites by Ladouceur (1979), and the analysis of the links between state power and traditional office in the Dagomba kingdom by Staniland (1973). Staniland, however, does not ask why the normative separation between 'politics' and 'tradition' has been maintained so tenaciously.

<sup>15</sup> One could even ask whether the 'big man' is not an additional role in its own right, a kind of super-role with its own exigencies, rather than the common denominator applicable to the three cases presented here. This may be so in southern Ghana, but in the north Dr Babanga, Dr Samson and Lambert Dagarti are all classified as 'big men' where, on the other hand, there are hardly any other avenues to 'bigness' than chieftaincy and politics. (Not incidentally, Lambert's career and status were made in the south and then transferred to his home in the north.)

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, F. G. 1969. *Stratagems and Spoils: a social anthropology of politics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 1993. *The State in Africa: politics of the belly*. London: Longman.
- Bierschenk, Thomas. 1993. 'The creation of a tradition: Fulani chiefs in Dahomey/Bénin from the late nineteenth century', *Paideuma* 39, 217–44.
- Daniel, Ebow. 1993. *Ghanaians: a sovereign people in profile*. Accra: Asempa.
- Foster, George M. 1965. 'Peasant societies and the image of the limited good', *American Anthropologist* 67, 293–315.
- Gilbert, Michelle. 1988. 'The sudden death of a millionaire: conversion and consensus in a Ghanaian kingdom', *Africa* 58, 291–313.
- Jahoda, Gustav. 1966. 'Social aspirations, magic and witchcraft in Ghana: a social psychological interpretation', in Peter C. Lloyd (ed.), *The New Elites in Tropical Africa*, pp. 199–212. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.
- Jones, Trevor. 1976. *Ghana's First Republic: the pursuit of the political kingdom*. London: Methuen.
- Ladouceur, Paul A. 1979. *Chiefs and Politicians: the politics of regionalism in northern Ghana*. London: Longman.
- Lentz, Carola. 1994. 'Home, death and leadership: discourses of an educated elite from northwestern Ghana', *Social Anthropology* 2, 149–69.
- 1995. '"Unity for development": youth associations in north-western Ghana', *Africa* 65, 395–429.
- Lentz, Carola, and Erlmann, Veit. 1988. 'A working class in formation? Economic crisis and strategies of survival among Dagara mine workers in Ghana', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 113, 69–111.
- Mbembe, Achille. 1992. 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa* 62, 3–37.
- Médard, Jean-François. 1992. 'Le "big man" en Afrique: esquisse d'analyse du politicien entrepreneur', *L'Année Sociologique* 42, 167–92.
- Meyer, Birgit. 1995. '"Delivered from the powers of darkness": confessions of satanic riches in Christian Ghana', *Africa* 65, 236–55.
- Nugent, Paul. 1995. *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana: power, ideology and the burden of history, 1982–94*. London: Pinter.
- Peel, J. D. Y. 1983. *Ijeshas and Nigerians: the incorporation of a Yoruba kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Price, Robert. 1974. 'Politics and culture in contemporary Ghana: the big man/small boy syndrome', *Journal of African Studies* 1, 173–204.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1963. 'Poor man, rich man, big man, chief: political types in Melanesia and Polynesia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, 285–303.
- Schatzberg, Michael. 1993. 'Power, legitimacy and "democratisation" in Africa', *Africa* 63, 445–61.
- Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Staniland, Martin. 1973. 'The manipulation of oral tradition: "politics" in northern Ghana', *Journal of Development Studies* 9, 37–90.
- Weber, Max. 1921. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Reprinted 1972, Tübingen: Mohr.
- Wilks, Ivor. 1993. 'The Golden Stool and the elephant tail: wealth in Asante', in Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: essays on the Akan and the kingdom of Asante*, pp. 127–67. Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press.

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the strategies of acquiring and legitimating power in Ghana, taking the example of three 'big men' from the north, a paramount chief, a mine captain and a politician in the making. After offering some observations on the recent public debate on the (im)morality of power and 'bigness', it outlines the biographies of these three 'big men' and analyses how they skilfully combine different registers of power and legitimacy. It then analyses the strategies of legitimation and grounds of moral judgement which depend, at least to a certain degree, on the particular relationship of the 'judge' with the 'big man' in question. The article concludes by discussing the common 'grammar' that seems to regulate the debates on 'bigness', morality and interest.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les stratégies d'acquisition et de légitimation du pouvoir au Ghana, en prenant l'exemple de trois "grands hommes" du nord, à savoir un chef suprême, un capitaine de mine et un futur politicien. Après quelques observations concernant le débat public récent sur la moralité (ou l'immoralité) du pouvoir et de la "grandeur", l'article expose à grands traits les biographies de ces trois hommes et analyse leur habileté à combiner différents registres de pouvoir et la légitimité. Il analyse ensuite les stratégies de légitimation et les principes de jugement moral qui dépendent, du moins dans une certaine mesure, de la relation particulière qu'entretient le "juge" avec le "grand homme" en question. L'article conclut en examinant la "grammaire" commune qui semble réguler les débats sur la "grandeur", la moralité et l'intérêt.

## LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 2 -



You have printed the following article:

**The Chief, the Mine Captain and the Politician: Legitimizing Power in Northern Ghana**

Carola Lentz

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (1998), pp. 46-67.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281998%2968%3A1%3C46%3ATCTMCA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>

---

*This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.*

### [Footnotes]

<sup>8</sup> **'Delivered from the Powers of Darkness' Confessions of Satanic Riches in Christian Ghana**

Birgit Meyer

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 2. (1995), pp. 236-255.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281995%2965%3A2%3C236%3A%27FTPOD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

<sup>13</sup> **'Unity for Development': Youth Associations in North-Western Ghana**

Carola Lentz

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 3. (1995), pp. 395-429.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281995%2965%3A3%3C395%3A%27FDYAI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K>

### References

**Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good**

George M. Foster

*American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 67, No. 2. (Apr., 1965), pp. 293-315.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-7294%28196504%292%3A67%3A2%3C293%3APSATIO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>

**NOTE:** *The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.*



## LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 2 of 2 -



### **The Sudden Death of a Millionaire: Conversion and Consensus in a Ghanaian Kingdom**

Michelle Gilbert

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 58, No. 3. (1988), pp. 291-314.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281988%2958%3A3%3C291%3ATSDOAM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3>

### **'Unity for Development': Youth Associations in North-Western Ghana**

Carola Lentz

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 3. (1995), pp. 395-429.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281995%2965%3A3%3C395%3A%27FDYAI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K>

### **Provisional Notes on the Postcolony**

Achille Mbembe

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 62, No. 1. (1992), pp. 3-37.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281992%2962%3A1%3C3%3APNOTP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N>

### **'Delivered from the Powers of Darkness' Confessions of Satanic Riches in Christian Ghana**

Birgit Meyer

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 2. (1995), pp. 236-255.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281995%2965%3A2%3C236%3A%27FTPOD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

### **Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia**

Marshall D. Sahlins

*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 5, No. 3. (Apr., 1963), pp. 285-303.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-4175%28196304%295%3A3%3C285%3APMRMBC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

### **Power, Legitimacy and 'Democratisation' in Africa**

Michael G. Schatzberg

*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 63, No. 4. (1993), pp. 445-461.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%281993%2963%3A4%3C445%3APLA%27IA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

**NOTE:** *The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.*