

**THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THEORIES OF POLITICAL
ECONOMY 2/21/11**

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ABSTRACT

The Bassar Chiefdom highlights the theme of multiple pathways to societal complexity emphasizing: 1) *heterarchy* with a focus on firstcomer primacy and the decentralizing power of corporate descent groups; 2) *ideology as a source of power* linked to the control of occult forces and the balance of divine and secular power; 3) *the disassociation between political and economic power* in the contexts of complex specialization within ironworking, the absence of a materialized ideology, and status based on a wealth in people; 4) *and the fluidity of Kopytoff's "internal frontier,"* including the use of "foreign elements" to arbitrate disputes arising within a heterogeneous refugee population fleeing regional slave raiders and the ever-present influence of neighboring states. The voluntary rise of ranked society and the relative roles of individual human agency and collective action are also examined. Finally, the Bassar Chiefdom is compared with the Sirak and Sukur polities of the Mandara Highlands in northern Cameroon.

Keywords: heterarchy, firstcomer primacy, ideology as power, slave trade, internal frontier, regional influences, wealth in people.

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THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THEORIES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The first part of this essay briefly summarizes major approaches to the rise of political complexity. The second describes the structure and powers of the Bassar Chiefdom, and the third examines this chiefdom in the context of these approaches to complexity, placing it in a regional context whenever possible (Stahl 2004).

PART 1: MAJOR APPROACHES TO THE RISE OF POLITICAL COMPLEXITY

1a: Neoevolutionary Typological and Materialist Perspectives

Chronologically, this concerns Steward (1955), Service (1962), Fried (1967), Rappaport (1967), Netting (1968), Carneiro (1970), Sahlins (1972), Harris (1974, 1977), Johnson and Earle (1987, 2000), and Earle (1978, 1987, 1994, 1997).

Their works have variably focused on social organization and social control, materialist causes of evolutionary change (e.g., population growth, environmental variability, and/or environmental circumscription), and the rise of centralized control with an emphasis on economic power, materialized ideological power, and the role of the individual. There is also a focus on a typology.

1b: Cultural Historical Baggage and Pathways to Political Complexity

The formalist-substantivist (later ecological vs. structural) debate has contrasted rational human economic behavior with cultural values that may outweigh strictly economic concerns; more recent emphasis has focused on how the ownership of

the means of production helps structure and maintain social inequalities (Johnson and Earle 1987:8; Friedman 1974, Godelier 1977, Meillassoux 1972, Polanyi 1957). It is now recognized the two approaches are complementary and that “cultural historical baggage” (Sahlins 1976) acts as a constraint on choice. African scholarship has also demonstrated the importance of core cultural values or “conceptual or symbolic reservoirs” (David and Sterner 1999; see Asombang 1999:85; De Maret 1999; Kopytoff 1987, 1999; MacEachern 1993, 1994; McIntosh 1999a; Sterner 1992; Vansina 1989, 1990, 1999), that variable cultural outcomes occur in similar environments, and that strict evolutionary typological thinking is unwarranted (Yoffee 1993:72).

1c: Sources of Power and the Role of the Individual

Earle (1997) sees the evolution of political complexity as resulting from the interplay between available sources of power and the ambitions of certain individuals in their quest for prestige and dominance, while recognizing that some cultures “discourage political striving,” that power struggles are often complicated and heterarchical, and that there is nothing inevitable about leaders emerging in all social contexts. McIntosh (1999a) sees this view of power as heavily biased by Western thought, where power is exercised toward practical ends in a context of domination and submission with an emphasis on individual rather than collective goals, and where ideology is seen as *primarily instrumental*, as opposed to viewing ideology and ritual as an integral part of cultural values.

Social Power

Earle (1997:5-6) sees social power as a given that can be used to increase other sources of power, i.e., it can be manipulated (increased) through strategic and multiple marriages, adoptions, godfathering, the purchase of slaves, and other alliance strategies that create or reinforce individual power networks. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this is called “wealth in people” (Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Goody 1976), where social power (with ritual power) can become a major form of *resistance* to the emergence of powerful leaders, particularly because of strong corporate descent groups and a multiplicity of associations (McIntosh 1999a).

Economic Power

Economic power can be institutionalized as staple finance or wealth finance (Earle 1997:6). Staple finance is based on tribute payments to the central polity and requires investment in food production to produce a surplus (Earle 1997:70-71). Wealth finance consists of the use of cultural valuables, prestige goods or money “to compensate people within ruling institutions,” and in chiefdoms, “wealth is the means of symbolizing relationships upon which social ranking rests” (Earle 1997:73). It is optimized by controlling elite goods production and/or exchange (Arnold 1995, Brumfiel and Earle 1987, Junker 1990, Saenz 1991). In Africa, low agricultural output and land abundance generally precluded a focus on staple finance; instead, polities emerged as groups manipulated long-distance trade to obtain revenues (McIntosh 1999a; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1969).

Military Power

Military power means coercive compliance, including warfare used to create and extend the power of centralized polities (Earle 1997:110). It works best in the context of productive and variable ecological zones and rapid population growth (Webster 1985:467), often leading to environmental circumscription (Carneiro 1970, 1977, 1981). But, military power relies on fear, and chiefs must in turn fear warriors who can rebel and betray; it is most effective when used in a controlled and restrained manner (Earle 1997:8).

Ideological or Ritual Power

Earle's (1997:149) view of ideology is essentially instrumental, "*manipulated strategically by social segments, most important the ruling elite, to establish and maintain positions of social power.*" Ideology must be materialized in the form of monuments, symbolic objects, ceremonial events, and writing, to become social (Earle 1997:151), but it is most powerful for elites when it is "rooted in economic control" over production and exchange (Earle 1997:13). A major question is to what extent ideology and ritual are used instrumentally as opposed to simply being an integral part of a society's world view (Kearney 1984). The former emphasizes human agency, the latter tends to see the evolution of culture as a largely unconscious, non-teleological process, like natural selection or Adam Smith's invisible hand.

1d: Hierarchy vs. Heterarchy

Neoevolutionary thinking assumes a relatively tight and predictable set of relationships between population density, environmental potential, agricultural intensification, political centralization and hierarchy, heterogeneity, and social and economic inequality (Earle 1997; Feinman 1995; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Johnson and Earle 2000; McIntosh 1999a:9; Nelson 1995; Northrup 1978; Shipton 1984, 1994; Tuden and Plotnicov 1970). Others have focused on the often heterarchical nature of political organization and power (Crumley 1987, 1995; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Mann 1986) – with multiple, often diffuse, nodes of power held by different cooperating and/or competing interest groups within society, each with their own “internal hierarchies” (Brumfiel 1992, 1994; Earle 1997:1). Heterarchy is particularly applicable to Southeast Asian and African polities (Apter 1992; Brooks 1993; Junker 2004; Southall 1956, 1988, 1989, 1999; McIntosh (1999a&b), where corporate groups often “successfully resisted . . . the consolidation of power by individuals” and where “social and ritual resources are [often] mobilized and collective action made possible in the absence of significant economic control” (McIntosh 1999a:4).

1e: Voluntarism and Resistance

Why did egalitarian societies develop social ranking? Many argue that coercion was important to this transformation (Carneiro 1970, 1977, 1981; Earle 1997), but Stanish (2004) sees it as a voluntary act. Using evolutionary game theory behavior (Bowles et al. 1997; Gintis 2000; Nowak et al. 2000; Shalizi 1999), he sees humans as “conditional cooperators” who will voluntarily give up some

economic and political autonomy if the benefits are sufficiently high -- benefits coming from “cooperative labor organizations” that “create economic efficiencies from specialized production” (Stanish 2004:8), including economies of scale. To work, there must be a social mechanism that ensures cheaters will be punished and individual benefits will be maintained. Stanish (2004:14-19) sees ritual as the mechanism that achieves this, rituals that promote an ideology of reciprocity. Once the process is engaged, the generation of surplus wealth permits emerging elites to maintain control through increased economic and ideological power.

1f: Kopytoff’s Africa’s Internal Frontier

Kopytoff (1987, 1999) argues that most African political entities did not evolve out of pre-existing simpler forms; rather, they grew out of immigrant settlements that split off from existing central polities – immigrants who migrated into the “internal frontiers” between fully formed regional political systems (Kopytoff 1999:88).

These areas were empty or occupied by small, decentralized groups or “weak local hegemonies”. These new groups brought with them pre-existing social and political models from their former polity (Kopytoff 1987:14). The principle of firstcomer primacy, a key to legitimate authority in African societies, led newcomers to struggle to “co-opt the mystical powers of the earliest settlers in relation to the land”; and in the context of acephalous societies, “a hierarchy can emerge through the simple process of adding new layers of immigrants under the kin groups that settled the area first” (McIntosh 1999a:21).

A recently arrived immigrant group sought to attract adherents as kinsmen or pseudo-kinsmen using a corporate kin group model; however, as the new polity became well established and had developed a *modus vivendi* with earlier firstcomer groups, including the ritual “owners of the land,” adherents increasingly were added under a contractual model between ruler and subjects (Kopytoff 1987:40-52). An ideological duality thus develops that tells the story of the polity’s creation from the differing views of ruler and subjects. This process of polity creation is useful for understanding processes of political change and continuity among and between African polities, large and small (Kopytoff 1987; McIntosh 1999a; Robertshaw 1999; Schoenbrun 1999; Vansina 1990, 1999).

Part 2: THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM

2a: What is a Chiefdom?

The office of chief is usually hereditary; however, a new chief might be: only mildly related to the former chief as a member of a chiefly lineage or clan; selected from outside the clan or be a foreigner; or selected from alternating clans or lineages. Fried (1967) distinguished between simple and complex chiefdoms. The former was chief of a single village with satellite hamlets or farmsteads; the latter minimally had a paramount chief ruling over local village chiefs in a regional polity. Simple chiefdoms have populations in the thousands and complex chiefdoms in the tens of thousands. Johnson and Earle (2000) view chiefdoms as a continuum of variability evolving from the Big Man collectivity to the threshold of the state; chiefly hierarchies and heterarchies are also viewed on a continuum, with the latter typical of sub-Saharan Africa

(Johnson and Earle 2000:266; McIntosh 1999a). For some, the term “chiefdom” has lost much of its meaning (Yoffee 1993), essentially covering all intermediate-level societies (Stanish 2004). For Bassar, the position of chief is quasi-hereditary and its scale and degree of hierarchy most closely resemble a simple chiefdom.

2b: The Bassar Region: Environment and Culture

The Bassar region of northern Togo is bisected by the Katcha River and is bordered by iron-rich hills and mountains, including the nearly pure hematite ores at Bandjeli (Figures 1 and 2). It has alternating dry and rainy seasons with an annual rainfall of 140 cm. The savanna-woodland vegetation has been heavily impacted by cultivation and deforestation. Subsistence is based on shifting agriculture focused primarily on yams and sorghum with millet and beans (*arachides*) as major secondary crops; cassava, okra, peppers, kapok, shea butter nuts and *neré* also play a role. For centuries, Bassar exported foodstuffs and iron products for cloth, charcoal, slaves, and cattle.

Since ca. 1800, most Bassar have lived in the four centers of Bassar (now 20,000 people), Kabu-Sara, Bandjeli, and Bitchabe. The Bassar are an amalgam of indigenous paragourma-speaking groups and immigrants from the north (Lamba, Konkomba, Gangan, Tyokossi, Gurma), west (Gouang or Gondja and Dagomba), and east (Tem or Kotokoli and Tchamba). Immigrants came to Bassar for its farm land, its iron industry, and as a place of refuge from regional slave-raiding (Cornevin 1962:24). The neighboring Kabiye often traded surplus

population as slaves to the Bassar for food. Slaves were used for field labor and as wives who farmed, made charcoal, and mined iron ore. Children of married slaves became freemen (Cornevin 1962; Klose 1903a, 1903b, 1964). Most immigrants have been assimilated and speak Bassar. The largest and most important Bassar clan, the Nataka Clan, claims an origin from the sacred forest of Dikre (Dikili) northwest of Bassar (Dugast 1992).

Communities are composed of a localized exogamous kin group or clan or an amalgam of several residence groups or “quartiers” (*kitingban*) belonging to one or more clans. Many clans are split among different communities, such as the Bissib, Koli, and Nataka clans. The oldest indigenous elements live in Tabale and Bidjomambe to the west, and in Kibedimpu, Tchadumpu (Nangbani), Kankunde (near Mt. Bassar), Taapu Napalib (Binaparba), and possibly in Biakpabe (Bassar) to the east. Many indigenous villages, such as Tabale, absorbed later migrants from other ethnic groups. At contact (1890s), many villages specialized in smelting, smithing, charcoal-making, and potting, while also farming (Figure 2).

At contact, Bassar political organization consisted of the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms in the east and relatively autonomous groups to the west from Bandjeli to Bitchabe to Dimuri. The chiefdom at Bandjeli is not discussed in colonial period literature, but it probably resulted from a Bissib (Lamba) migration in the later 19th century. Prior to colonial times, most western communities were likely presided over by lineage elders (*ukpil*).

2c: Brief History of the Bassar Region

The Iron Age and the Growth and Impact of Large-Scale Iron Production

Research at Dekpassanware (Figure 2) dates early iron production to 400-200 B.C. (de Barros 2003, 2011) when small bellow-driven furnaces were used by probable ancestral Lama populations. Induced draft furnace technology appears in the late 13th century (de Barros 1985, 1986) with iron products traded to neighboring populations.

The emergence of the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja states (Figure 1) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries greatly increased the demand for iron weapons, horse paraphernalia, and protective chain mail for their cavalries. These states, along with Bono-Mansu and then Asante, stimulated long-distance trade into the Middle Volta Basin by the Hausa. Bassar responded with a spectacular growth in iron production between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (de Barros 1986, 2001). Major iron production centers developed north of Bandjeli and Kabu and at Tipabun (Figure 3). Bassar iron markets thrived (e.g., Natchammba) and Bassar blacksmiths organized trading parties to adjacent areas. Bassar iron was traded throughout Togo and eastern Ghana with the help of Tyokossi and perhaps Hausa traders (de Barros 1985, 1986; Dugast 1986, 1988). The thriving iron industry led to a marked population increase due to better living standards, the importation of slaves as field laborers, and the immigration of ironworkers from regions that had exhausted local wood supplies (Goucher 1984) or were plagued by local strife or slave raiding.

Industrial growth led to larger, more sedentary villages; a population shift closer to major ore deposits (de Barros 1988); specialization within the iron industry (Figures 3 and 4); and, a rising standard of living for ironworkers, especially clan elders who often became rich men – amassing wealth in the form of food, cowrie shells, cattle, slave labor, and imported goods (Dagomba brass rings, Kirotashi agate beads on the Niger, and European glass and native ground beads; Klose 1964:162-163). It is not known whether the new regional settlement pattern of larger villages with satellite hamlets resulted in incipient big men or simple chiefdoms (de Barros 1988). A chiefdom was perhaps present at Dikre before the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom (Dugast 1988), but no chief names are remembered.

Effects of Slave Raiding by the Dagomba and Tyokossi

Beginning in the late 1700s, Bassar was subjected to major slave raiding by the Dagomba and the Tyokossi kingdom to the north (de Barros 2001). The Dagomba sought slaves and cattle to pay tribute to the Ashanti and the Tyokossi sought slaves to raise food. In this effort, the Dagomba laid siege to the town of Bassar from ca. 1873-1876. While the Dagomba never conquered Bassar, there is some evidence Bandjeli may have periodically paid tribute or gifts (Dugast 1992:62; Rattray 1932:580) . The Tyokossi may have briefly collected tribute from Kabu (de Barros 2001:69-70), but never from Bassar (Dugast 8/1/10, p.c.).

This slave raiding led to the abandonment of the Bassar peneplain between 1775 and 1825 and the regrouping of populations in mountain refuge areas like today

(Figure 4). Major ironworking centers moved to new locations: south of Djowul Mountain near Bandjeli, at Sara near Kabu, north of Nangbani near Bassar, and closer to the mountains at Bitchabe. Populations left Dikre and settled near Mount Bassar at Nangbani, Bukpassiba, Wadande-Bassar, and Kibedimpu. This slave raiding and population shift coincided with the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom.

At contact (1890s), community specialization was common in the west with smelting near Bandjeli, smithing from Ignare to Natchamma, and charcoal-making at Dimuri. In the east, smelting and smithing communities were associated with the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms (Figure 2). Some communities only farmed and a few did both smelting and smithing. The women of Kankunde, Langonde, Jimbire, and Moande near Mount Bassar specialized in potting. Tanning took place but was not a community specialization. Kotokoli cloth, obtained in exchange for iron, was dyed by Bassar women (Klose 1903b:342), but there was no group of Kotokoli weavers in Wadande-Bassar as has been reported (Dugast 1992:194-196).

The Kabu Chiefdom

This small chiefdom was founded in the 1850s by elements from Kalanga who had fled after losing a battle to the Bassar chiefdom. Its founding elements were influenced by Islamic models associated with the neighboring Kotokoli chiefdoms in Sokode and Bafilo. Kabu exploited the trade of iron, food, and slaves between the Kabiye and Bassar regions (Gnon 1967). Some traditions state the founding chief, Oukpane, ensured his chiefdom of an independent supply of iron bloom

and tools by inducing smelters and smiths to settle at Sara (Gnon 1967), but recent research indicates these migrations were voluntary (Dugast 1992:162).

Hausa Caravans and Long-Distance Trade

A major Hausa caravan route passed through Bassar as early as the late eighteenth century, coinciding with the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom and a steep demand for kola among the Hausa. Hausa caravans exchanged primarily cloth and cattle for kola nuts in Salaga and later Kete Kratchi (Figure 1). The route through Bassar was the shortest which helped preserve the perishable kola. In times of insecurity, as during the Dagomba siege, caravans entered Ghana further south. With the German colonial peace in the 1890s, caravans traveled once again through Bassar. By 1900, 30,000 Hausa merchants passed through each dry season (Norris (1984:168).

2d: Origins of the Bassar Chiefdom and Bassar Populations

Early German observers tended to exaggerate the power and extent of the Bassar Chiefdom, suggesting it once held sway over the entire Bassar region, and that the Dagomba War had weakened its power. Actually, the chiefdom was relatively small -- 25 to 80 sq km with a population of five to ten thousand (Cornevin 1957:96; de Barros 1985; Dugast 1988). It was centered on Bassar and may have included Kalanga at times. It was created between A.D.1780 and 1810 (de Barros 1985:723-729), which coincides with the onset of intensive slave raiding and the Hausa kola route through Bassar (Barbier 1982; Norris 1984; de Barros 1985:325-329).

Archaeological data confirm that intensive slave raiding led to the abandonment of the Bassar plain, with the last group at Dikre leaving in the early 1800s. Oral traditions from Nangbani Tchadumpu and Obridumpu, Kibedimpu, Kuwadimpu-Wadande (Bassar), and Bukpassiba state their ancestors left Dikre under the leadership of Bangaraku. Kibedimpu became the Bassar Chief's residence, close to Mount Bassar for protection; Nangbani, Bukpassiba, and Wadande were spaced across the landscape to alert the Bassar of impending slave raids (de Barros 1985:662-667). Bissib smelters settled at Binadjube-Nangbani (and later Sara) and Bissib smiths settled in Bukutchabe-Bassar (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976; Dugast 1992:125). Byakpabe and Nangbani also became important smelting communities (Figure 4). Smiths of the Koli clan settled in several Bassar communities, including Bitchabe and Binaparba. However, not all Bissib and Koli clan members practiced metallurgy, and many smelters and smiths were from other clans (Dugast 1992:120-193; see Martinelli 1982, 1984).

Who were the "indigenous" populations of Bassar?

Oral traditions collected by Mercier (1954:15), Froelich and Alexandre (1960), Froelich et al. (1963:16), and Gbikpi-Benissan (1976, 1978, 1979) suggest there were once indigenous "Lama" populations (ancestors of the Lamba and Kabiye) in the Bassar region (Dugast 1992:138ff). Archaeological evidence (ceramics and mortuary patterns) from the industrial site of Dekpassanware (Figure 2) strongly suggests the presence of ancestral Kabiye (Lama) in the region from ca.

800 B.C. to 150 A.D. (de Barros 2011); and present-day Kabiye blacksmiths continue to use the heavy stone hammers once used by the Bassar (Dugast 1986). For the Lamba, Dugast (1992:136-137ff) notes that local informants are virtually unanimous that Bissib (Lamba) smelters of Binadjube-Nangbani are the “owners” of the four iron hills north of Bassar (Figure 2), yet they apparently migrated to the region only recently. Gbikpi-Benissan (1976, 1978) also suggests Lamba are present in the indigenous community of Kankunde. Dugast (3/12/09, p.c.) found no evidence of this, but admits their ethnic origins are a mystery.

The Naafal clan of Byakpabe-Bassar also claims firstcomer status. Once described as of Mossi or Losso origin, they are, in fact, of Gurmantché (Gurma) origin (Dugast 1992:117, 169), from neighboring Burkina Faso. It claims an important ritual role in the installation of the chief, which the Nataka clan categorically rejects (Dugast 1992:54, 868-869).

The Chiefly Nataka Clan

The pioneering elements of the relatively heterogeneous Nataka clan consisted primarily of Gondja (Guang) peoples from near Kete Kratchi in Ghana (Figure 1), some fleeing the Dagomba (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:81), before establishing themselves at the sacred forest of Dikre several centuries ago. Some elements may also be of Kotokoli origin (Dugast 3/12/09, p.c.; 1992). Lineages of the Nataka clan are found in Kibedimpu, Nangbani, and Bukpassiba-Ussakar; in Wadande-Kiwadimpu, Ketangbao, and Kpaajadumpu in Bassar; and in

indigenous Kankunde by incorporation (Dugast 1987, 1992; Gbikpi-Benissan 1978:8). In legitimizing the indigenous status of the whole clan, given the conflicting oral traditions about firstcomer status, Chief Ouro Bassabi Atakpa told Gbikpi-Benissan (1978:7) that the first Nataka lived in holes in Bassar Mountain.

Rebirth of a Chiefdom

Dugast (1988:274-279) argues the Bassar chiefdom was a reinvention and improvement upon an earlier, less centralized, perhaps even failed “chiefdom.” The primary goal was to reduce clan factionalism and to create an institution that could deal with the huge influx of foreign refugees created by intense slave raiding, especially by rendering fair judicial decisions (Dugast 1992:854-886; 2004). The chief was selected from the Nataka clan and ruled with the help of a council of its elders. The clan was a political composite consisting of indigenous and foreign elements and associated ritual leaders. The latter include: 1) the *utandaan* or ritual servant (chosen through divination) of the clan’s place of origin and its associated powerful medicine (*digtangbandi* or “skin of the earth”) buried in the Dikre sacred forest by clan firstcomers (*bitindaambi*) in order to “capture the locality”, i.e., humanize or civilize the land prior to occupation (Dugast 2004; Liberski-Bagnoud 2002); and, 2) other ritual leaders linked to rain, wind, fertility, and the locusts that devastate crops. This grouping of indigenous and other ritual leaders within a single clan provided the spiritual legitimacy the chief needed to rule, but at the same time tightly circumscribed his authority (Dugast 1988:274-275; 2004:231)

Counterbalanced Power – the Sorghum Harvest Ceremony

The sorghum harvest ceremony takes place in three phases that symbolically represent the diffuse and heterarchical nature of the Nataka clan and the Bassar Chiefdom (Dugast 1988:275-276). First, clan members split into two groups, one performing ritual acts in the chief's quarter (Kibedimpu), the other in the quarter of the Dikre *utandaan*. Second, everyone from both groups gets together in the *utandaan's* quartier, and after a ceremony, they go to the Dikre sacred forest where the Dikre divinity (*ditangbandi*) lives. Third, the chief ends the ceremonies with a ritual he performs at Kibedimpu (Dugast 1988:275). The last two phases express the duality between the chief's group and the *utandaan's* group – phase two excludes the chief who is never allowed to enter the sacred forest and phase three excludes the *utandaan* (Dugast 1988:275). The sorghum beer libations are meant to give life and vigor to both parties. A libation is done on the stone used during the installation of a new chief, symbolizing how the chief's power is conditioned by his need to satisfy all of the local deities whose help are essential for the exercise of his power (Dugast 1988:276). During his reign, the chief is symbolically associated with the Bassar (town) *ditangbandi* at Kibedimpu, marking his separation from his clan's Dikre *ditangbandi* until his death, when he disappears into the ground at Dikre (Dugast 2004:234-242).

Counterbalanced Power – Alternating Chiefs

The duality expressed above is reflected in the precolonial tradition of alternating between the two groups each time a new chief is selected through divination.

This tradition rose out of the goal to bring in a neutral, impartial outsider who could best arbitrate the constant disputes that were creating anarchy within the old chiefdom as its population grew and became increasingly heterogeneous due to refugees from slave raiding and immigrant ironworkers (Dugast 1988:277-279). This older chiefdom was too diffuse and was not functioning well. The solution was to capture a foreigner, a good Kotokoli man, and make him chief. Of the alternating groups, the first is associated with Chief Ouro Atakpa's lineage (Nyandin of Tchadumpu-Nangbani) associated with reorganization of the chiefdom; the other, indigenous group is associated with the Dikre *utandaan* and Chief Jintija's lineage that used to provide the chief before the reorganization (Kuniagbu lineage of Kibedimpu). Tchadumpu and Obridumpu-Nangbani alternate in handling the installation of the chief, but Tchadumpu alone reenacts the original capture of the chief (Dugast 1988:278; 1992:868-871). Local informants do not recollect chief names prior to Bangaraku who led the Nataka from Dikre to Mount Bassar, though Chief Ouro Atakpa said 14 chiefs are buried in a tomb at Dikre and eight at Kibedimpu (Szwark 1981:19).

Counterbalanced Power – Indigenous Firstcomers, Immigrant Latecomers

Kankunde is an indigenous community whose status virtually no one disputes. This is reflected in its relationship to the Nataka chiefly clan. Kankunde is integrated into the Nataka clan which begrudgingly accepts it provided them with land to settle when they arrived; however, it does not participate in the annual sorghum harvest festival to honor the Dikre divinity and has no legitimate right to the position of chief – even discussing the possibility is an extremely volatile

subject (Dugast 3/12/09, p.c.). Nonetheless, Kankunde plays a ritual role that is an essential part of the installation of a new Bassar chief (Dugast 1992:759-760; 10/11/10, p.c.). It is not possible to verify Gbikpi's (1978:121) claim that Lamba elements are present there.

Both Biakpabe (of Gurma origin) and Bukundjiba-Bassar (of Kabiye origin) also claim firstcomer status (even over Kankunde), although they do not claim to be indigenous (Dugast 1992:874-876; Cornevin 1962:45; Gbikpi-Benissan 1978:4ff). Oral traditions obtained by the author reflected Biakpabe claims of involvement in the selection and/or installation of the Bassar chief. One informant recounted how the new chief has to choose between two stones, one representing the "earth" and the other representing "secular power"; and that if he chooses the "earth" stone by mistake, a special ceremony must be performed in Biakpabe, and a secret one in Bukpassiba where his head is shaved. He also said Biakpabe brings the first harvest of yams to the chief and has the right to sow the first millet (actually fonio) seeds (Biakpabe means "fonio farmer"; Dugast 1992:877). Dugast (8/1/10, p.c.) has heard similar stories, but it involved a stone and a wooden bench; he was even shown the place in the vestibule of the *utandaan* of the Naafal clan of Biakpabe. A second informant said Biakpabe does not select the chief, but does perform the final phase of the installation ceremony.

In later research, Gbikpi-Benissan (1984:17-18) learned the following from four Biakpabe informants: Biakpabe introduced yam farming to the area; the people of Biakpabe are more interested in deities than the office of chief and that is why the chief is at Kibedimpu; and, the people of Kibedimpu choose the chief, who is then elected in Nangbani. However, the chief is only installed after showing he can distinguish the royal stone from other stones presented to him in Biakpabe and can identify those who belong to the royal line and those in the “earth priest” (probably *utandaan*) line. Although firstcomer and chiefly installation claims by Biakpabe are completely rejected by the Nataka clan, Dugast (1992:679, 868-870) emphasizes that all of the clans in Bassar attribute important (magical) powers to Biakpabe, especially related to yam germination; Biakpabe is also exempted from the harder physical labor required in the chief's fields and has the honor of planting the first yams. These conflicting stories of firstcomer status reflect the *modus vivendi* that develops between indigenous firstcomers and immigrant latecomers described by Kopytoff (1987).

2e: The Formal Organizational Structure of the Bassar Chiefdom

Gbikpi-Benissan's (1976:123, 130) analyzed the structure of the Bassar Chiefdom and described its specialized political terminology. It is not clear, however, whether the structure was as formal as he suggests or whether these terms were often used (Dugast 10/13/10, p.c.). The word *obote* was used to indicate chief, as opposed to *odjindjinkpli* (military chief or leader) or *utandaan*. Common phrases used in reference to the chief include *obote ni ouzamao*, “the

chief is the people,” and another translates as “the chief holds together all Bassar” (Dugast 1992:230). Title holding was not important in Bassar. The head of a quartier (*kitiŋban*) or head lineage elder (which became a chief in colonial times) is called *debotebre*; his political, judicial, and ritual responsibilities are largely local, but Gbikpi-Benissan asserts his judgments could be overturned by the *bosolib*. The latter is a traditional “court” consisting of four judges (*natchimbe*) selected from clan elders (including *debotebre*) and the Bassar chief. It judges assaults, murders, land boundary and tree ownership disputes, theft, quarrels, unpaid debts, adultery, the kidnapping of women, and so on. Murder was punishable by death. If a defendant refuses to cooperate, the case was sent to the *akpambal* (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:131), apparently a kind of appeals court made of a group of elders. The uncooperative defendant before the *bosolib* was tied to a cut-down tree and his fate decided. This assembly also met if a *kitiŋban* refuses to obey a chief’s order. The elders of the recalcitrant *kitiŋban* are forced to explain the reasons for their behavior, and then told by the assembly to either submit or choose another chief, i.e., be exiled (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:131). There was thus a three-tiered judicial system: at the clan or clan segment level (*debotebre*); above the clan level relating to serious disputes or crimes between individuals (*bosolib*); and one handling disputes between residential groups or clans (*akpambal*) (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:131).

Gbikpi-Benissan also describes two other bodies, the *unatchebe* and the *diber*. The former was an assembly made up of all *debotebre*, village “chiefs” under the authority of the Bassar Chief (a probable colonial development as no indigenous

term for village chief is provided), and the *natchimbe* of the *bosolib*. Gbikpi-Benissan says it discusses laws (*mara*) proposed by the chief which it can reject or unanimously approve, operating through consensus, not majority rule. Dugast (8/1/10, p.c.) states this is incorrect – *mara* is a Hausa term and no formal legislative body exists in Bassar, only judgments. The *diber* was a government (executive) council headed by the chief that includes the *natchimbe*, *debotebre*, and “police.” It transmits the chief’s orders and judgments and communicates the peoples’ concerns and wishes to the chief. Police were selected by the chief to question people, to do errands or missions for the chief or to arrest potential criminals; they were also farmers. They were part-time police who had no authority beyond what the chief asked them to do (Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:132).

Inter- and intra-clan conflicts were common (Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:123-126). The first were often between the Nataka and foreign (latecomer) clans; the latter between senior and junior clan members. Sources of conflict included women, cattle, and farm land. Control over iron resources was not a major issue, though communities valued having smelters and smiths in close proximity. Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:126) describes clans as pressure groups, reflecting the chiefdom’s heterarchical nature. The use of physical force to make people comply was problematic; moral persuasion and peer pressure were the best tactics, including the threat of exile. No formal police force existed to enforce decisions (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:134-135).

2f: The Bassar Chief's Sources of Power

Economic Powers

The Bassar Chief had no influence over planting and harvesting decisions; during droughts, the elders, the chief, the *utandaan*, and those with power over nature prayed to the deities for rain. Chief Atakpa stated that the chief was the “owner” of the land as head of the Nataka clan, whose ancestors were viewed as firstcomers; that each *kitinḡban* had a granary in the chief's courtyard which it filled with grain after each harvest and kept it filled at his request; and, that there was a big hut for people to provide yams for the chief (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976). However, a very different story was heard from informants in Nangbani-Tchadumpu (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:128). They denied food was given to the chief in this manner; rather, the Nataka of Nangbani Tchadumpu and Obridumpu and in Wadande helped farm the chief's fields, and part of the hunt was given to the chief. During colonial times, all *kitinḡban* helped the chief farm his fields because he had so many administrative duties. Atakpa later admitted the granary system was replaced by field labor. Gbikpi-Benissan believes either food or labor was provided for the chief as needed – an economic privilege granted to the chief (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:129). In Bassar and Kabu, the chief decided when and where new arrivals were granted land to farm, though some informants say such decisions were made by *kitinḡban* heads who then informed the chief of their actions (Gnon Konde 4/10/06, p.c.).

Religious or Ritual Powers

The chief and representatives of his clan presided over harvest festivals, but libations were done by the clan's *utandaan*. The *utandaan* is an important ritual leader in Bassar because he is the ritual servant of the divinity (*ditangbandi*) associated with the Nataka clan's place of origin at Dikre, and because he is chosen by divination instead of by genealogy, thereby separating him from kinship ties. This institution helps unite the heterogeneous clans of the Bassar region (Dugast 2004:229). The Nataka clan is viewed as the firstcomer clan for all Bassar. The chief derives his ritual power through his association with the *ditangbandi* of the entire Bassar agglomeration; moreover, his installation emphasizes this link to Bassar and his separation from his clan's *ditangbandi* at Dikre, thereby elevating him above clan rivalries.

At the level of residential group (*kitingban*), a critical duty of the head diviner and clan firstcomers is to keep the place "beautiful," i.e., to keep out evil influences and make it attractive to foreigners. This is largely done by organizing a fire dance with neighboring *kitingban*. The fire dance is central to Bassar ritual activity and involves diviners discerning the silhouette of potential evil influences in the flames, concentrating this evil in the cinders, and then disposing of them at a crossroads at the edge of town. The chief and his clan have the responsibility of organizing a fire dance for all Bassar; more importantly, if the chief has the visionary powers to foresee evil, he can order ritual action to render harmless that evil at the town's crossroads without a fire dance. No one else has such power in Bassar (Dugast 2004:210, 232-234).

The health and fate of chiefs and kings in Sub-Saharan Africa is often directly linked to the health and vitality of his polity (Kopytoff 1987:63-64). The Bassar Chief could not resign or refuse to be chief once chosen, and the resignation or departure of a chief was seen as disastrous – it would lead to deaths within clans, widespread disease among the population, and famine (Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:130). However, in Bassar, it is expected that a chief's health will *decline* as he works hard to keep Bassar beautiful by removing evil influences. He can be reinvigorated through a periodic ceremony involving a dissident group of his clan (at Kpaajadumpu-Bassar), but this only puts off the inevitable end when he will disappear into the ground at Dikre (Dugast 2004:237-242). This symbolic journey that begins with the chief's allegiance to the Bassar divinity and ends with his rejoining his clan's divinity at Dikre also shows the Bassar were unwilling to allow a complete rupture between the chief and his clan that is typical of sacred kingship in many parts of Africa (Dugast 2004:231).

Military Powers

According to Dugast (1988), the Bassar did not go to war to conquer territory. They went on raids to attack, burn, steal cattle and show one is strong. The chief could decide to go to war, in principle with the consent of his council. He was protected during war and did not enter the battlefield. Chief Dintidja (Jintija) defended Bassar against the Dagomba in 1873-76 and the first Chief Atakpa is linked to a major precolonial battle, but they did not take part in combat (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:129-130). Bassar chiefs should never be exposed to real danger.

The absence of formal police and the problematic effectiveness of the use of force suggest the chief's military powers were limited.

Judicial or Political Powers

The chief was head of the judicial tribunal (*bosolib*), the judicial assembly of elders (*unatchebe*), and the government (executive) council (*diber*). While only the chief could propose rules and while he played a major role in judicial matters, decisions were generally reached through consensus. The chief's judicial powers are emphasized by a triennial remaking of the roof of the palace vestibule where judgments are rendered, and all segments of Bassar must contribute (Dugast 2004:243). In colonial times, he became more powerful and was referred to as "Chef Supérieur" (paramount chief). Some traditions state the chief received important sums for his judicial decisions, but this was only true in colonial times. Traditionally, only gifts were offered if the plaintiff or defendant was happy with his decision (Dugast 1988).

The chief's power was focused on preventing and settling internal disputes, encouraging cooperation at all levels, mitigating social inequalities, and keeping Bassar "beautiful" (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976; Dugast 2004). His authority was legitimated at several levels: practical – justice and order and the welfare of the people were promoted and maintained; religious – the chiefly installation and harvest festival ceremonies provided the ritual support and legitimation he

needed to rule; and ideological – he was chosen from and by the “indigenous” Nataka clan and its composite elements.

Part 3: THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM & THEORIES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

3a: Influence of Hierarchical Neoevolutionary Models

Such models focus primarily on economic power and would see the rise and growth of the Bassar Chiefdom as potentially the result of long-distance trade (Hausa caravans), warfare, and/or large-scale iron production.

Economic Powers and Systems of Staple or Wealth Finance

Aside from Chief O.B. Atakpa’s unsubstantiated claim about food tribute, there is no evidence the Bassar Chief supervised or controlled a system of staple finance. There was no intensification of production other than extra labor for the chief’s fields provided by Nataka clan members and others. Traditional gifts predominated, not formal tribute (Dugast 1988, 1992; de Barros 1985).

This author (de Barros 1985:331-337) once suggested the Gurma chiefdom at Djugu (Benin), the Kotokoli chiefdoms in Bafilo and Sokode, and the Bassar chiefdom arose in response to the Hausa kola route through Bassar. Martinelli (1982:31, 36, 81-82) even claimed there was a system of wealth finance, i.e., the Bassar chief levied tolls on caravans and taxes on market operations and received iron products as tribute from local smelters and smiths. However, no informants in either Bassar or Kabu could verify these points. Martinelli’s source was apparently Chief O.B. Atakpa.

Dugast (1988:269-273) and de Barros (1985, 1986, 2001) have shown the chief did not significantly benefit either directly or indirectly from the passage of the long-distance Hausa caravans or from iron production and trade. First, there is no evidence that anything other than symbolic gifts (millet beer, poultry) were offered to the chief by Hausa caravan leaders, though one could argue such gifts added up over time (Nicholas David 8/10/06, p.c.). Second, the chief did not obtain tribute, taxes, or judgment fees in the form of prestige or other trade goods that could be commercialized via long-distance or regional trade. So called “tribute” was minimal and consisted of short, once-per-year labor requirements, contributions of food and a part of the hunt, and poultry when needed for ritual sacrifices (de Barros 1985:67-68; Dugast 1988:272). Judgment fees consisted of providing millet beer if the plaintiff was satisfied. Such tribute was primarily to help support the chief and indigent followers (including widows), and was more symbolic than economic in nature (Dugast 1988:272). Third, neither the chief nor his immediate subordinates exercised control over iron production, which was directed by local clans, clan segments or extended families (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:164, 238). The iron tool trade was controlled by Bassar smelters and smiths who sold iron products at local markets and by smiths who organized regional caravans to neighboring peoples (Dugast 1988:269-270). The production of pottery, hides, and dyed cloth was tied to the household, was essentially for local needs, and was not part of a system of tribute. Finally, slavery was strictly a

domestic institution in Bassar; slaves were not organized into work groups to produce a political surplus (Dugast 1988:269-273).

Military Power and Warfare

Was the Bassar Chiefdom expansionary? Did it develop as a defensive response to slave raiding (de Barros 1986:166-167)? Several sources noted the military rivalry between the Bassar and Kabu (de Barros 2001:71). However, Dugast (1988:273) concludes the Bassar Chiefdom was not warlike and rarely engaged in anything more than minor pillaging raids (see Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:104-106). The chiefdom controlled primarily the area 5 to 10 km north and west of Bassar, including at times the village of Kalanga (Dugast 1988, Pawlik 1988). A major attack on Kabu by Bassar involved a dispute with the people from Kalanga and was not an attempt to incorporate it into the chiefdom; and, Bassar was defeated!

The primary motive for the creation of the Bassar Chiefdom was political (Dugast 1988, 2004). The Tyokossi and Dagomba slave raiding led to an increasingly heterogeneous population aggregated near Mount Bassar. Horton (1971), Cohen (1974), and Vincent (1991) (see David and Sterner 1995) have argued that increased settlement size and aggregation, primarily due to warfare, leads to increased clan heterogeneity. This increased heterogeneity, aggregation, and circumscription of the population inevitably calls forth the need for more centralized political institutions to deal with disputes. In Bassar, the population was so concerned about disputes that the first chief was selected from a foreign

group to ensure impartiality in his decisions. Subsequently, the chief's office was to alternate between these foreign and indigenous elements of the Nataka clan.

Ideology and Ritual, Conceptions of Power and Core Values

Neoevolutionary models focus on the instrumental nature of ideology, the materialization of ideology, and how chiefly power is rooted ultimately in economic power. McIntosh (1999a:14) emphasizes that sacred kingship in Africa was based on indigenous concepts of power, prosperity, and legitimacy not shared by Europeans (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940:16) and that ritual modes of power were often of major importance in providing a centralizing focus in otherwise decentralized, heterarchical societies (Netting (1972). Asombang (1999:85), discussing the sacred centers of the Bafut Kingdom of the Cameroon Grassfields, stresses how power is not coercive; that it is not only rooted in ritual and religion, but also linked to generosity and the ability to feed people; that the concept of power in Sub-Saharan Africa "has more to do with the ability to engage or contain occult forces than with military force, administrative authority, or economic control."

Kopytoff (1999:93) notes how neoevolutionary theories focus on material advantages both as a means to power and as an important goal of power, whereas in African societies status and hierarchical display are valued for their own sake. This fits the African cultural tendency to emphasize "wealth [and investment] in people" as opposed to "wealth in things," and that one gains status

from such wealth in people (Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Goody 1976; McIntosh 1999a:6-7, 16; Guyer and Belina 1995).

This importance of ritual power to control occult forces and the status of “wealth in people” can be seen as part of the “conceptual reservoir” (David and Sterner 1999) of sub-Saharan African cultures. Moreover, the strong, largely unilineal corporate descent groups often staunchly resisted attempts at centralization (Vansina 1990, 1999:161, 166-167; McIntosh 1999a:17-18). The decentralizing power of such kinship groups is reinforced by common cultural conceptions: the ritual importance of firstcomer primacy; the existence of multiple deities linked to fertility, rain, wind; and the idea that ritual power could be collectively coordinated or supervised, but was dangerous if centered in a single individual who might use it for evil instead of good (McIntosh 1999a:15-17; Packard 1981; Guyer and Belinga 1995; Herbert 1992). So important was this balancing of secular and ritual power, it often led to sacred kings who reigned “over a central ritual domain but [did] not govern” (MacGaffey 1987; McIntosh 1999a:15; De Maret 1999:162).

The Bassar Chief’s political power and authority were legitimated by the beneficial nature of maintaining justice and promoting the general welfare (keeping Bassar beautiful); by his role in collective harvest festivals; and by an installation ceremony that balanced secular and ritual power, giving weight to firstcomer primacy, clan autonomy, multiple ritual figures, and both indigenous and foreign chiefly elements, all drawn from the composite Nataka clan.

Hierarchy vs. Heterarchy

The Bassar Chiefdom is clearly a chiefly heterarchy (Ehrenreich et al. 1995; Johnson and Earle 2000). The political economy was weakly developed with food and iron production firmly in the hands of corporate descent groups. The chief's military and quasi-legislative powers, and to a lesser extent his judicial powers, were greatly circumscribed by the power of local descent groups with decisions largely reached through consensus (Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:141-148, 167, 238-239; see also Meillassoux 1960, 1981). Finally, the chief's ideological or ritual power was counterbalanced by that of other groups, based on firstcomer primacy, the independent power of the *utandaan*, and relative clan autonomy.

3b: Specialization and Domestic Production for Exchange

Feinman and Nicholas (2004) show how previous work on chiefdoms and early states present a simplified dichotomy where independent household specialists are replaced by nondomestic "workshops" attached to ruler or ruling elite as the political economy becomes more complex and centralized (Costin 2004:189). However, one should not assume specialization equals nondomestic production or describe the social relations of production as either independent or attached (Costin 2004:196). Local networks of production and distribution were often outside the control of central polities (McAnany 2004:145, 164).

What is striking about Bassar is the degree to which specialization developed within the iron industry without any concomitant rise in political centralization (see

also McIntosh 1999a&b). While the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms may have encouraged smelters and smiths to reside in their vicinity, such specialization was already present. In western part of the Bassar region, regional and/or community specialization in smelting, smithing and charcoal-making was not associated with centralized political organization; and the chiefs of Bassar and Kabu exercised virtually no control over iron production and exchange. Such specialization was linked to two sources: 1) it was often associated with a particular clan or clans: like the Bissib who were primarily farmer-smelters (but sometimes did smithing), and others, like the Koli, who were primarily smiths (but some may have once been smelters, and some only farmed); and, 2) specialization was sometimes tied to environmental variation. When the Bassar region became deforested over time, specialization in charcoal-making developed at Dimuri where forest remained. Local informants also emphasized that the smelting-smithing dichotomy between the Bandjeli and Bitchabe zones was due to high-quality ores at Bandjeli and high-quality stone for anvils and hammers near Bitchabe (de Barros 2001:67). It should be noted, however, that some communities, such as Bikonbombe near Bandjeli, Bukutchabe (Bassar), and the community of Sara had both smelters and smiths. Finally, some clans or clan segments only farmed.

Specialization *within* smelting and smithing was probably the result of the arrival of induced draft furnace technology and its attendant economies of scale in the face of greatly expanded regional demand after the sixteenth century. Within

smelting operations, work groups, often differentiated by gender, specialized in mining, charcoal-making, furnace construction, and smelting. Within smithing, women generally crushed iron bloom and the male smithing team consisted of bellows operator, stone hammer specialist, and master smith who directed operations and was usually the only one who converted iron bloom into usable iron (Dugast 1986; Goucher 1984). Specialized ironworking activities operated at the household or residence group level, though there is some evidence for cooperation at the clan level across communities (de Barros 2000:198).

3c: Coercion vs. Voluntarism and Rise of Ranked Society

Stanish (2004) argues the crossing of the threshold from an egalitarian to a ranked society was a voluntary step, not the result of coercion, and that this step was taken due to the benefits of specialization and simple economies of scale. In discussing the formation of the Alur segmentary state (Uganda-Congo), Southall (1999:30-31) notes how different groups were incorporated into a more centralized polity through “an exchange of services.” An external group, the Atyak, managed to get a number of smaller groups to accept them as their leader, because they were larger, had respect for a superior leader and knew how to rule, and entertained the local populations with food, beer, music, and dancing and provided ritual services and arbitration in disputes. While “there may have been threats of force . . . neither side speaks of forceful conquest” (Southall 1999:30). Different groups voluntarily collaborated and provided

different services – the Okebo provided ironworking, the Lendu agricultural labor, and so on (Southall 1999:132).

The Alur case fits Stanish's (2004) voluntary model insofar as it involved inducing existing specialists to collaborate in a larger polity. It also parallels the formation of the Bassar Chiefdom in that a foreigner (Kotokoli) was invited, without coercion or conquest, to become chief because it would provide a neutral, external element better able to resolve disputes within a growing, heterogeneous refugee population. It did not result in a ranked society, but it did create a stronger chiefdom and did involve a voluntary, though limited, reduction in clan autonomy (Dugast 1988). However, the striking element that does not fit Stanish's model is the development of a high degree of specialization *before* any significant centralizing tendencies. In the western region little significant ranking developed; in the eastern region, the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms were created without any major material benefit accruing to the chief and with no major loss of autonomy on the part of local households and their *kitingban*.

3d: The Role of the Individual vs. Collective Action

Earle (1997:2) assumes "the benefits of leadership are sufficient to explain the quest for prestige and dominance" and that there are individuals who wish prominence in all societies. This Western concept of power emphasizes the individual and the secular, whereas in sub-Saharan Africa the emphasis is on ritual power and collective action linked to the power of corporate kin groups (McIntosh 1999a). In Bassar, secular power must respect the primacy of

firstcomer ritual power and the ritual importance of the Bassar and Dikre *utandaan*; the chief's power is diffuse and rests on a balance between secular and ritual power.

Despite this apparent dichotomy between the Western and African views, there is room for both collective action and ambitious individuals in the African context. Kopytoff (1999:92-93), while discussing how chiefdoms can emerge through a process of "layered growth" by the accumulation of increasing numbers of immigrant populations who must recognize the primacy of firstcomers, describes how Aghem chiefs in western Cameroon often tried to institutionalize new demands from their subjects with varying degrees of success.

They would claim that control of all raffia bushes [for prized raffia wine] was ultimately a chiefly prerogative. They would try to extend the chief's existing rights to certain large animals . . . to other large and even not so large animals. They would try to assert a monopoly of all meat resources. Several chiefs tried to extrapolate their normal ritually sanctioned right to first fruits into rights to a larger harvest tribute. Some redefined existing communal hunts in a way to make them benefit the chiefs directly; and some instituted special grass-cutting days to provide fresh material for their houses. In this drive for power, Aghem chiefs adapted certain elements of the regional culture (Kopytoff 1999:92).

Kopytoff (1999:93) goes on to show how a chief of WaeNdu used the new German colonial presence to transform his authority into a “murderous despotism that included the killing of several chiefs.” This process occurred in other parts of early colonial Africa and is echoed by Kamehameha’s use of British technology to conquer the Hawaiian Islands (Earle 1997). In fact, it is likely that the first Chief Atakpa at contact is responsible for early German views of a hegemonic Bassar Chiefdom that once ruled the entire region, perhaps hoping to use German power to create one. Later Bassar Chiefs managed to utilize French conceptions of chieftaincy to expand their powers to become Chef Supérieur.

Vansina (1989, 1990, 1999), well-known for his dislike of neoevolutionary models in his studies of Central African Bantu society – with its contrasting ideologies of power and resistance, “one asserting the supernatural powers of leaders [“big men”] and the other the equality of all people” – observes that the institution of sacred kingship eventually developed out of the former through “the ambition of gifted leaders and their invention of new institutions to enlarge and perpetuate their power” (Vansina 1999:168).

3e: The Bassar Region and the Internal Frontier

In many ways, the Bassar region parallels the processes operating within Kopytoff’s (1987:16-17) “internal frontier.” It was a region of small, decentralized groups or “weak local hegemonies” with little or no evidence of centralized polities in the archaeological record for centuries prior to the Bassar Chiefdom (de Barros 1985). Another key similarity is the importance of in-migration from

neighboring regions – some seeking to avoid internal disputes in their homeland, others seeking better farmland, still others fleeing slave raiders, as well as farmer-ironworkers who left areas whose wood fuel was depleted or whose ores were no longer accessible due to civil strife. Immigrants came from different cultural areas but most were assimilated into the structure of Bassar society, though they never forgot their origins. Firstcomer primacy also played an important role in the structuring and legitimization of the Nataka clan and the Bassar Chiefdom.

Kopytoff (1987) emphasizes that the internal frontier often attracted royal or chiefly elements that fissioned off from nearby centralized polities, and who might then gradually develop into a polity modeled upon the one they had left. This may have been the case for the elements that became the Bissib chiefdom in Bandjeli (Dugast 1992:138-162), but it was not the case for the Bassar chiefdom. A foreign element (Kotokoli) was involved, it was not a royal or chiefly element that had fissioned off from the Kotokoli chiefdom based in Sokode. One critical difference between the Bassar Chiefdom and the neighboring Dagomba, Gondja, Tyokossi and Kotokoli centralized polities was that the latter were all influenced by Islam, whereas the Bassar Chiefdom was not. The Kabu Chiefdom, however, was partly influenced by the organizational structure of Islamic Kotokoli chiefdoms and adopted some of its administrative terms (de Barros 1985:68). While the arrival of immigrant latecomers did contribute to the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom as a way of settling disputes among such a heterogeneous population,

it is not a close fit with Kopytoff's model which focuses on recently arrived immigrant groups seeking to attract adherents as kinsmen or pseudo-kinsmen under a corporate kin group model, leading to the eventual rise of a contractual model between ruler and subjects.

However, the composite nature of the Nataka clan (and other clans) does lend itself to Kopytoff's (1987:40-48) kin-group model for attracting adherents, where latecomers become incorporated as 'pseudo-kinsmen' as the polity grew by increasing its "wealth in people." In fact, established firstcomer communities in the region gauged the success of their community in large part by its ability to attract strangers (foreigners), which were indeed forged into pseudo-kinsmen through a process of assimilation where such newcomers were integrated into an existing clan and residential group (*kitingban*) (Dugast 1992:244-248). Finally, there is clear evidence of a *modus vivendi* that attempts to resolve conflicting versions of firstcomer status between the chiefly Nataka clan on the one hand and the indigenous community of Kankunde and other rival firstcomer groups, especially Biakpabe (see Kopytoff 1987:53-69). We see this in the conflicting versions about the candidacy, selection and installation of the chief and the participatory roles of these groups in the chief's installation and the planting of the first yams.

3f: Sirak and Sukur Polities of the Mandara Highlands

In a broader regional context, it is useful to compare the Bassar Chiefdom with the Sirak and Sukur polities of the Mandara Highlands of northern Cameroon

(David and Sterner (1999), especially in terms of the degree of central control over ironworking and exchange – which essentially did not exist in Bassar.

Sirak

Sirak has about 2,000 people. Its origins are similar to the Bassar Chiefdom in that “political unrest and fission” resulting from “exploitation and raiding by state societies” are implicated in its creation which involved the amalgamation of “a small number of clans” coming from different directions (David and Sterner 1999:101). It is also a decentralized society with widely dispersed and minimal coercive powers. The chief’s role was

to oversee the ceremonial cycle, offerings, and sacrifices on behalf of the community to a distant god, and to the main spirit of the place, that of the mountain around which the settlement clusters . . .Privileged access to the spirit constitutes the basis of the chief’s authority. While he has sacred responsibility for the land, he does not own or control it. . . In such matters, he acts not on his own initiative but rather as spokesman for the ill-defined grouping of clan elders that act as his counselors . . .

(David and Sterner 1999:101-102)

He has no power to raise taxes and can be quite poor. He has no monopoly on the use of force, and faced with serious disputes, he can “refuse to carry out his ritual duties, thus mobilizing the community’s moral pressure against those responsible” or he can (in theory) get his own relatives to use physical force

(David and Sterner 1999:103). The authors conclude he is a “priest-chief” as described by Netting (1972:221) and is a relatively powerless figure. His main role is to “represent the community to itself” for which he “receives respect, materialized in his position at the apex of community rites and in minor gifts, especially of beer” (David and Sterner 1999:103).

This description parallels Bassar in many respects; however, the Bassar Chief played a more important role as a mediator of disputes between the various elements of a larger, more heterogeneous refuge population (more clans) than in Sirak. Sirak also lacks a specialized ironworking industry; and its small size and subsistence economy, with limited potential for intensification, provided limited means for generating a surplus that could be used to increase central power (David and Sterner 1999:106).

Sukur

This polity partially resembles the Bassar Chiefdom – it was larger than Sirak, with a more dense population (perhaps 5,000) and it had an important iron industry that exported large quantities to the surrounding region. However, it was a net importer of food, whereas Bassar was a food exporter. Its iron industry was similar to Bassar’s in that both are largely household based, but differed in that slaves were not significant for food or iron production; in fact, David (1996) has described it as a classless industrial society, unique in Africa and perhaps the world (David and Sterner 1999:104).

Unlike the Sirak chief, “whose authority emerges from politically neutral, cosmological origins,” the powers of the Sukur chief had to be “constantly negotiated” (David and Sterner 1999:104). Like the Bassar Chief, he was not responsible for actual sacrifices to local mountain spirits, nor did he directly intervene to control rain – i.e., ritual power was widely distributed in Sukur society. Again, like the Bassar Chief, he played a role in initiating community ceremonies (David and Sterner 1999:Table 8.1). However, “in comparison with other Mandara chiefs [and the Bassar Chief], *xidi* Sukur lacked legitimating authority” (Smith and David 1995).

Like Bassar, its population was very heterogeneous (22 clans) and resulted from centuries of immigration. The reasons may be similar to those of Bassar (e.g., those seeking farm land, immigrant ironworkers, refugees from political strife), but they are only hinted at by David and Sterner (1999:104). Immigrants were assimilated but it included a ritual mechanism unknown in Bassar, i.e., many clans claim an origin in Gudur, a sort of pan-Mandara magico-religious center to which many Mandara communities were linked, including Sirak (David and Sterner 2009, in press). Integration was also “assisted through elaboration of the institution of title holding . . . distributed among all the clans anciently installed” (David and Sterner 1999:104). Title holding is not significant in Bassar.

Another major difference lay in the Sukur chief’s economic powers. He benefits from *corvée* labor and can mobilize male initiates (who probably created paved

pathways and the large royal residence); more importantly, he had greater access to wealth through his participation in the iron industry and export trade (David and Sterner 1995:10-11, 13; David and Sterner 1999:Table 8.1). In short, his sources of economic power were more developed than in Bassar. He also had more judicial and administrative power as he could enforce his legal decisions, sometimes with armed support, and could appoint some title-holders (David and Sterner 1999:104-105). Yet, he had to constantly negotiate his ritual, economic, judicial and political powers, because of countervailing power centers associated with factions within his own chiefly clan (the Dur), including frequent and often successful coup attempts, as well as the relatively decentralized, familial organization of iron production which “ensure its benefits were widely shared” (David and Sterner 1999:106). Indeed, it would appear that an ingrained resistance by clan groups to the centralization of power was part of the “conceptual reservoir” of the Mandara highlands (David and Sterner 1999:106-107).

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Figure 1 -- Bassar and Bassar iron trade in West Africa. Relationship to states of the Middle Volta Basin and Hausa kola routes c. AD 1800.

Figure 2 – Bassar region showing iron ores, chiefdoms centered on Bassar and Kabu, and specialist villages at contact (1890s). The Early Iron Age (400 BC-150 AD) ironworking site of Dekpassanware is also shown.

Figure 3 – Bassar region c. AD 1600-1750. Major ironworking villages and sites are shown near Bandjeli, Kabu, Nababun (Tipabun), and Bassar. Insufficient data are available for the Bitchabe area.

Figure 4 – Bassar region c. AD 1825/1850. There has been a major shift in the distribution of smelting settlements to south of Bandjeli and closer to the large mountains adjacent to Kabu and Bassar. Tipabun and Dikre have been abandoned and two major smelting centers appear north of Bassar.







