INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, West Africa has been the source of consistently innovative work, much of it relevant to the field of anthropology in general. British structural-functionalist ethnography, particularly the Cambridge school of Fortes and Goody, set theoretical and empirical standards which have rarely been matched anywhere. Again, briefly in the 1970s, anglophone social anthropology was almost overwhelmed by a school of French structuralist Marxists with its base in West African research. Moreover, the region has been a crucible for the emergent synthesis of anthropology and history; economic anthropology, the study of urbanization and economic development, and the politics of decolonization have all been prominent there; and West Africa’s independent women have attracted the attention of numerous feminist anthropologists. For these and many other reasons, developments in the social anthropology of West Africa are of more than parochial interest.

This paper is an introduction to the best regional literature of the last four decades, paying most attention to the period since 1970. It cites many more books than articles. The subject matter is social anthropology, which means that much cultural anthropology and archaeology has been omitted. The bias in materials selected is toward anglophone writings. The majority of texts are introduced with only a few words each. The paper is therefore a discursive means of entry for interested outsiders rather than a critical addition to professional knowledge of the region. The presentation is divided into three main sections. The first of these covers the late colonial period (ca 1940–1960); the second addresses the immediate postcolonial decade (roughly the 1960s); and the third seeks to identify the trends of the last 15 years or so. The periods refer to date of publication, not to the time of original research, thereby lending a
further indeterminacy to what is in any case only a rough mnemonic device. One major theme is the postcolonial shift in emphasis from ethnography to history.

This is no place to offer a brief guide to West Africa’s history and geography (e.g. 113, chap. 2), but a few remarks are in order. West Africa has about 150 million people in a land area of 4 million km$^2$, much of it semidesert. More than half of that population lives in Nigeria, the rest in some 16 small states formed by decolonization 25 years ago. Within a single lifetime’s span, West Africans experienced both their first collective conquest and incorporation into the United Nations as citizens of independent states. Whereas much of Northern Nigeria and Mali supported a complex, stratified civilization for many centuries, the majority of West Africans have never been subjected to class rule, have always had easy access to land, and have never lost control of the means of production, even during colonialism. In consequence, the West Africa of the 1980s is that region of the world least penetrated by capitalist production. This is reflected in the spirit of its peoples and in the chaos of its political economies. Much of the region’s social anthropology has been inspired by the relative freedom and disorganization of West Africans; yet indigenous novelists and playwrights have captured the uniqueness of their forms of life most effectively.

THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD (ca 1940–1960)

The British School of Structural-Functionalist Ethnography

The publication of *African Political Systems* (74) in 1940 marked the coming of a golden age in British social anthropology. Its aim was to announce a discovery (acephalous polities) and to celebrate the method responsible (ethnographic fieldwork). Political order was shown to be possible without the state, thereby undermining much in the history of Western political philosophy. Moreover, scientific investigations on the ground in Africa had revealed what speculation never could. The influential introduction by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes drew explicitly on theoretical contrasts made by Morgan and Durkheim, but preferred to stress the empirical basis of their ideas. There were two West African contributions to the volume—by Nadel and Fortes himself. Subsequent ethnographies were addressed not to a specific regional discourse, but to the wider project of a social anthropology dominated by works of African origin. A decade after *African Political Systems*, another volume brought together research on *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (180), introduced by a massive statement of conceptual elaboration and social classification by Radcliffe-Brown. Much of the work of this period traced the variable influence of unilineal descent on the organization of domestic groups formed through kinship and marriage. Anthropologists whose peoples had no lineages were
obliged to explain their deviance from a model which had worked for the Greeks and Romans, for the Iroquois, and now for a rapidly expanding corpus of African ethnography.

Evans-Pritchard and Fortes were the standard bearers of British social anthropology at its height. They collaborated intimately in the years before and after World War II. Each wrote up his main research as two complementary monographs, one on political structure and one on kinship. Their ethnographic style and reach differed. Evans-Pritchard wrote over a broader front and with more explicit concern for intellectual history (73). But Fortes’ two studies of the Tallensi (83, 84) arguably stand as the supreme synthesis of theory and description in British social anthropology. The first monograph on this stateless people of the Gold Coast’s interior (The Dynamics of Clanship) struggles painfully with the canons of ethnographic writing which Fortes helped to invent. On the one hand the anthropologist must be true to the particularity of his sources—there are scores of proper names in the narrative. On the other hand he must address a general Western audience at a high analytical level. The resulting text has a unique honesty and power; it is also difficult to read. In most accounts of these societies the reader is left guessing how lineages and the like actually work; Fortes leaves out nothing of significance. The second monograph (The Web of Kinship) is much more accessible, being rich in detail and illuminated by simply expressed ideas. Here we see the stuff of interpersonal relations and the social rules inherent in their patterning. The life cycle of family groups is laid out in a tour de force of narrative and analytical skill. For Fortes the task was always to find the abstract in the concrete without losing the concrete along the way. British ethnography had discovered a new art form: the spirit of scientific inquiry was brought to observations made of exotic peoples living in their familiar social context. At first the intellectual and moral dilemmas posed by this method were far outweighed by the evident heuristic advantages.

Fortes’s immediate successor in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast was J. Goody. The LoDagaa were similar to the Tallensi and, as his first monograph shows (95), Goody did not have much new to say about them. Articles on incest, the mother’s brother, earthcult shrines and much else (94, 96, 98) established Goody as a substantial anthropologist; but his main contribution at this time was to a volume on The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups (97). This arose out of Fortes’ analysis of Tallensi kinship, which he had continued in a brilliant essay on Ashanti domestic organization (the title chapter of 85). The idea was to derive a picture of the ebb and flow of domestic life from a statistical cross-section, allowing extrapolations of a diachronic sort to be made from synchronic observations. Fortes showed that different phases of a common development cycle could be understood in terms of morphological features of family life, such as the accession and loss of members, particu-
larly children. Goody's description of production, consumption, and residence in the LoDagaa farming economy captures well the fluidity of domestic arrangements; and Stenning's path-breaking account of Fulani domestic cycles [(208); see also his excellent monograph (209)] applied the model to pastoralist subsistence strategies with equal effect. The idea of a development cycle of domestic groups was not invented by Fortes and Goody, even though its impact on anthropology was both novel and deservedly widespread. A Russian economist, A. V. Chayanov (43), had come up with the idea some decades earlier in relation to an analysis of peasant economy. Fortes once told me that he had been inspired by the work of D'Arcy Thomson (217), but if so, he never acknowledged it in print. The development cycle concept introduced a temporal dimension to kinship studies without breaking ranks with British ethnography's concerted resistance to historical methods.

Further investigations into the stateless peoples of Southern Nigeria's forest and rivers revealed social organization owing little to the lineage principle. Forde's impact on West African anthropology was much greater than his writings alone would suggest. For a long time he was director of the International African Institute and head of anthropology at University College London. He shared his peers' preoccupation with kinship (77), but was also a leading exponent of social anthropology's affinity to economics, ecology, and geography. His comparative study, *Habitat, Economy and Society* (76), is a classic. Forde's writings on the Yakō (80) and on such peoples as the Efik (79) revealed the rich associational life of these cultures. Green's Igbo ethnography (106) and Little's study of the Mende of Sierra Leone (138) also confirmed the significance of secret societies in the organization of West African stateless polities and chiefdoms, a feature of the region highlighted earlier by the German anthropologist Frobenius (87). In the Cameroons, Kaberry carried out a pioneering study of women (126); and E. Ardener's demographic approach to bridewealth and divorce among the Bakweri (13) was unique for its time (the division between our periods) and well worth reading now.

The Tiv of Nigeria's middle belt, in the hands of L. and P. Bohannan, emerged as the clearest independent example of a segmentary lineage society after the Nuer and the Tallensi. At this stage the Bohannans owed more to their socialization in British anthropology than to their American origins. The result is an outstanding ethnographic record, published in several books and numerous articles (e.g. 30, 32, 33). But there is more to West Africa than stateless societies and forest chiefdoms. The vast civilization of Northern Nigeria forced a rather different approach on its ethnographers. (Hausaland alone contains one sixth of West Africa's population.) Remarkably enough, British anthropology found ethnographers equal to the task. Nadel's *A Black Byzantium* (159) is probably the most compendious monograph on a complex society ever produced by an anthropologist. Its subject is the Nupe Kingdom—its towns and
villages, its political history, its colonial economy, and its variable culture. Nadel was a theorist of the first rank, who also worked in the Sudan. He now seems marginal to the mainstream of late colonial British anthropology, but his great work truly anticipated the focus on historical political economy which is such a prominent feature of the 1970s and 1980s.

At much the same time, Forde published (with Scott) a summary of Nigeria’s “native economies” (82) which has never been surpassed. The best individual account of indigenous economic organization was M. G. Smith’s report on the Hausa communities of Zaria (199). Here the subordination of peasants to state rule is laid out in stark detail, with due emphasis being placed on the political conditions of economic life. Smith’s contribution to the debate on segmentary lineage systems was original, but not influential (200). The same could not be said of Government in Zazzau (201), a synthesis of ethnographic and historical method which leads directly to the postcolonial flood of interest in the history of African states. Like Nadel, Smith is a major theorist (with affinity to Weber). Finally, West Africa has a longstanding urban tradition in the coastal fort towns where European mercantilism generated creolized populations. Banton’s study of Freetown (23) was the first in a growing body of urban anthropology. He and Little together made Edinburgh a center for urban research in the postcolonial period.

From this it can be seen that, even in its heyday, the British school responded to West Africa’s complexity by addressing centralized polities and cities in addition to the stateless peoples of the countryside. The theory underpinning research in all areas, however, has been labeled “structural-functionalism” (179). Social structure was understood to be manifest in empirical social relations, and behavior was functional to the extent that it contributed to the coherence and integration of institutions forming a social structure. Customary behaviour was most likely to act as the repository of significant institutional forms. Historical statements by informants were of dubious value. In most cases it was assumed that documentary records did not exist. Armed with these assumptions, the ethnographer spent a year or two identifying the contemporary patterns of social life in one place, then a decade or more talking to his British colleagues before writing up a monograph. In both phases internal consistency was taken to be a powerful proof of veracity. This radical commitment to synchronic method has been subjected to much criticism since. Yet its best practitioners were more sophisticated than their latterday critics. Fortes lays out his reasons for abstracting Tallensi ethnography from its historical context (the precolonial situation and colonial rule) in the introduction to his first monograph (83). He believes that the conditions for structural transformation (e.g. the emergence of stratified classes) have not yet occurred, and he would be right to say the same now (112). His analysis of time and social structure in Ashanti (85), a state which had undergone profound changes in less
than a century, demands subtle argumentation from anyone who seeks to reject the claims of structural-functionalism out of hand. Nadel (160) and M. G. Smith (202) offer equally complex methodological statements.

To be sure, the British ethnographers rarely were explicit about their relationship to the colonial state (18); and they were sometimes directed to politically troublesome areas. (Thus the Tallensi were being shelled by a British army as late as 1911 and the LoDagaa were part of a border dispute with the French.) They had little interest in the history of the precolonial period and scarcely more in colonial structures and their imminent breakdown. One exception makes the general point. Busia was an Ashanti aristocrat and a future prime minister of Ghana. His book on the position of the chief in modern Ashanti politics (41) was in many ways exemplary of structural-functionalist method—too much so, according to his leftwing critics. But the format is explicitly historical, dealing with the colonial transformation and its possible aftermath. At least one African then used the approach to explore political alternatives to colonialism. Most ethnographers, however, wrote of their subjects as if the sun would never set. After the achievement of independence by the new West African states, such an orientation, whatever its virtues, became impossible to sustain.

French and American Contributions

Afrique Occidentale Française was an important crucible of modern French anthropology and its leading exponent was Griaule. A charismatic figure whose work covered the last three decades of the colonial period, Griaule is best known for his work on the Dogon and Bambara of Mali. His closest collaborator was Dieterlen, but their school contained several notable ethnographers who spanned decolonization—Paulme, Rouch and Griaule’s daughter, Calame-Griaule (45). The turning point was the publication in 1948 of Dieu d’Eau or Conversations with Ogotomméli (107), a Dogon sage who was apparently deputed to reveal the secrets of his people. Dieterlen’s Essai sur la Religion Bambara (60) and Griaule and Dieterlen’s joint masterpiece Le Renard Pâle (108) are the highlights of a remarkable record. Griaule began as something of a collector, with an interest in documentation of all kinds, especially visual. But later he came to see the Dogon, even particular places or individuals, “... as privileged examples of l’homme noir, microcosms of ‘African’ thought, civilization, philosophy and religion” (45, p. 123). Ethnography became like initiation, a search for “deep knowledge.” The style could not contrast more with the British fieldwork method. Griaule was incorrigibly idealistic and ahistorical, unconcerned with the details of practical existence. He relied throughout his life on translators and a few native informants; he discounted the significance of ordinary speech. His approach was an alternative to intensive participant observation; yet he was extremely self-conscious about interaction with the sources of his knowledge.

Whatever one’s judgment of their anthropological merit, the corpus of
writings produced by the Griaule school contains many fine examples of collaborative work in which Africans played an active role. Moreover, in Rouch the school generated an exceptional and prolific ethnographic film maker, whose work brings the ideals and standards of his mentors to modern audiences. Finally, the publication of *African Worlds* (78), a collection which included contributions by Dieterlen and Mercier under Forde’s editorship, revealed a British interest in cosmology even when structural-functionalism flourished. As a footnote to this brief account, it should be pointed out that not all Frenchmen were seduced by the mysteries of African culture. Several writers pioneered the study of indigenous social organization and political economy. The most notable of these was Labouret’s monograph on the peasants of Mali and Ivory Coast (130), a book which was cited, for instance, by Fortes and Goody in their Voltaic researches.

American anthropologists were slow to become involved in West Africa before the 1970s. The dominant figure was of course Herskovits, whose great work on Dahomey was published in 1938 (115). Herskovits’s approach was essentially that of culture history; and his method resembled that of the semiprofessional colonial anthropologists who preceded the academic field-workers. Even so, his ethnography was compendious and is still valuable. Herskovits made Northwestern University for a time the leading center for African studies in America. We have seen how the Bohannans were converted to British social anthropology for their Tiv research. It is worth mentioning that L. Bohannan early on published an impressive comparative piece on West African marriage types (29) and, as “Eleanor Smith Bowen,” wrote a sensitive, funny memoir of fieldwork (38) which easily bears comparison with more recent reflections on doing ethnography. Two other American studies during the colonial period were conducted in the region’s dry savanna outposts. Miner’s monograph on the medieval city of Timbuktoo (156) was based on research carried out during World War II in French territory; while R. Cohen (48, 49) set extremely high standards of empirical and analytical work in his ethnography of the Kanuri of Bornu State, Northern Nigeria. These disparate contributions do add up to an American presence in colonial West Africa; but it lacked the coherence of the schools led by Fortes and Griaule.

THE IMMEDIATE POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD
(ca 1960–1970)

*The Modernization Decade*

It is a truism to say that decolonization transformed West African anthropology. Apart from anything else, it was hard to sustain a synchronic, local level approach to societies whose wholesale reconstruction was so visible, month to month as it were. New nations wanted new histories—invented traditions and charters for the future. Anthropologists carried the bad smell of a reactionary
colonial specialism, and many changed their label to that of sociologist, demographer, or whatever. Moreover, idealism was breaking out all over the Western world in the 1960s, and Africa was the repository of unrealistic hopes for a better political and economic order. This was the decade of modernization, an American theory of social improvement with insufficient connection to historical knowledge for its application to regions like West Africa to be seriously impeded. The postcolonial world was above all else the political kingdom; and its academic overlords were the political scientists, men such as Apter [whose Ghana monograph (12) is excellent] and Easton (70), whose impact was mainly theoretical. R. Cohen & Middleton’s book, From Tribe to Nation (50), is a rare attempt by anthropologists to grapple with the heady politics of state formation. I have isolated the first years of independence because they were unusually confused. Much material published then was collected in the late colonial period; and new initiatives taken then really bore fruit in the 1970s. There was much unfocused excitement and optimism, but little genuine understanding of the structures that were evolving everywhere. Modernization theory itself was more an abstract psychology than a method for investigating social organization.

Anthropologists made an explicit attempt at this time to break new ground, addressing economic development, precolonial history, urbanization, the position of women, and belief systems. None of this, as we have seen, is without precedent in the colonial literature; and traditional ethnography of a high standard continued to be produced, much of it French. But if one man epitomizes the shift in the balance of anthropological effort after decolonization, it is J. Goody, whose work is considered below. At last West African creative writing burst on the scene to pose an indigenous challenge to anthropological representations of their societies. Given its unwelcome associations with the recent past, anthropology did not appeal to Africans as a vocation, so the vast bulk of work in the subject was carried out by the trinity of Western nations with which we are already familiar.

Economic Development

Export agriculture in West Africa is largely a peasant enterprise and local commerce is extremely lively. So, following on the work of Labouret, Forde, Nadel, and others, anthropologists and members of related disciplines set out around the time of decolonization to document the institutions of indigenous economic organization. Bohannan and Dalton’s edited collection of essays on African markets (34) is notable for the quality of its case studies; but, more important in some ways, their introduction attempted a theory of economic development which was more complex than the models of one-way diffusion and static dualism then in vogue. Their idea was that peripheral marketplaces mediated between local economies and the forces of an exogenous capitalism.
It was crude and it has been much criticized (68), but this publication was a landmark in economic anthropology. The Bohannans’ monograph on Tiv economy (31) further established the influence of the Polanyi school in the region, and Netting’s fine study of the Kofyar of Nigeria (161) brought American cultural ecology to research on West African agriculture. Two works, however, stand out for their public impact in this field. Hill’s investigations into the migrant cocoa farmers of Ghana stretched back to the mid 1950s, but her 1963 book (117) had enormous influence. Virtually singlehanded she recast the image of West African producers, revealing their pioneering role, entrepreneurial character, and continuing dynamism. Meillassoux’s monograph on the Gouro of the Ivory Coast (151) is likewise concerned to a large extent with export agriculture, but its notoriety stems from its status as the first self-acknowledged Marxist ethnography. The Gouro book became for Marxists the equivalent of Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (72), a canonical text through which savants expressed their competing opinions. Other studies, like Netting’s, are superior as ethnography, but Meillassoux made West Africa a focal point for Marxist discourse. Mention should also be made of Pelissier’s massive tome, *Les paysans du Sénégal* (173), an apparently exhaustive compilation of sources on the groundnut economy of the Senegambia. The proto-Marxist style of his analysis is not to everyone’s taste; but this impressive book, along with Dupire’s meticulous research on the Ivory Coast’s cocoa farmers (66), makes for an outstanding record of indigenous rural economy in the 1960s. It seems likely that the development preoccupations of the new states and the relative absence of foreign capitalist producers combined to stimulate this quite remarkable achievement by West African anthropologists.

**Precolonial Kingdoms**

If the classical studies of the late colonial period were of stateless peoples such as the Tallensi or the Tiv, the 1960s saw an explosion in historical research (much of it by anthropologists) on West Africa’s precolonial kingdoms. These states were an indigenous point of reference for self-government. The new ruling class was not looking to replicate their structure, but it needed national or regional histories to teach the school children. Anthropologists responded to the challenge, whether consciously or not; and a growing army of historians, many of them American, joined them in the task of rebuilding African studies. A collection edited by Forde and Kaberry, *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (81), captured this shift in emphasis. At that time the nineteenth century was simply taken to be the nearest precolonial era; but as African historiography matured, the period came to be understood as one of crisis and dislocation. Several notable monographs were published in the 1960s. Last (133) followed the lead of Nadel and M. G. Smith in Northern Nigeria to produce a more sophisticated historical account of the Sokoto
Caliphate. Jones's work (125) on the trading states of the Oil Rivers (the oil in question being of the palm) was a pioneering study of the highest quality. Bradbury's piecemeal historical ethnography of Benin belongs to this period; it epitomizes the best of the old and the new in West African anthropology. Polanyi's posthumous study of the Dahomean slave trade (177) never made as great an impact as his more general works. Wilks (e.g. 225) was beginning his great work on Akan history, helping to make Asante eventually the best-documented African kingdom; but his contribution will be considered below. Finally, historians such as Mauny (150) and Levtzion (136) put real time depth into West African history by bringing the medieval period into sharper focus. The result of these efforts was that anthropologists could no longer claim with conviction that the peoples they studied had no history. Ethnography in the region has never been the same since.

Urbanization

The growth of cities and associated migrations stimulated a great deal of research and publication immediately after decolonization. Kuper's collection (129) was interdisciplinary but restricted to West Africa; Miner's edited volume (157) extended to the continent as a whole. Banton's essay in the first of these (24) is perhaps the best single piece for anthropologists. This was a time when West African researchers were self-consciously engaged in a dialogue with the Manchester School of Central African research (223). Southall (204) reports on work from both areas and seeks to establish a suitable comparative typology. The main point of contrast was the relative freedom of settlement enjoyed by migrants to West Africa's cities compared with the more rigid regimes farther south. This is reflected in the work written and sponsored by Little (139). He emphasised continuities of identity among migrants whose adaptations to the city were facilitated by their own voluntary associations—a far cry from the mines of the Copperbelt, where Gluckman's team described sharp oscillations between the demands of rural and urban life. An outstanding product of this discourse was A. Cohen's influential study of Hausa traders in the Yoruba city of Ibadan (47). He described ethnicity (a new term for tribes and tribalism) as symbolically loaded political competition between groups for control of valued resources. The model would not seem dissonant in Chicago, but it was a breath of fresh air for Africanists. The Yoruba of Western Nigeria are a nation many millions strong, who live in a wide variety of towns. In the 1950s they were about as urbanized as France. The 1960s were the heyday of Yoruba research, much of it addressed to the specificity of their urban social organization. Lloyd (141, 142), Bascom (26), Morton-Williams (158), and Schwab (193) all contributed important studies; and Wheatley's massive comparison of city origins (224) endows the Yoruba with the status of being a primary (aboriginal) center for urbanization.
The Position of Women

The floodtide of feminist research had not reached West Africa in the 1960s, but several excellent studies of women were published then. Leith-Ross’s *African Women* (135) is perhaps the slightest of these. Paulme’s collection of essays entitled *Women of Tropical Africa* (171) belongs more to the colonial period than after, but its intellectual standard is very high. Much the best product of this period, however, is M. F. Smith’s wonderful biography, *Baba of Karo* (198), a Hausa woman whose story is both moving and vivid. Kaberry’s lead was thus taken up in the era of decolonization, but as yet only sporadically.

Belief Systems

An urgent priority of the new states was to shed Western cultural imperialism, to discover African ways of thinking, and to legitimize indigenous beliefs. Fortes and Dieterlen (86) brought together an impressive collection of British and French papers under the heading *African Systems of Thought* which, whether intentionally or not, showed that anthropologists could play a significant part in that process of intellectual decolonization. No anthropologist has done more in that respect than Horton (e.g. 121), whose papers on African thought, on religion, and science have helped to shape discourse on such matters far beyond the limits of his adopted Nigeria. Apart from reviving interest in traditional belief systems, the postcolonial era drew attention to the impact of modern changes on African religious movements and psychology. Lanternari (132) specifically set out to examine the historical context of millenarism in different places. Peel’s intensive study of the Aladura movement in Western Nigeria (171b) addresses similar issues, but in a way that is more satisfying as ethnography. Finally, Field’s eccentric but interesting studies of Southern Ghanaian psychology (e.g. 75) deserve wider exposure than they get. Above all, she and some of her peers felt obliged to examine the effects of contemporary forces on “the African mind,” even as the social climate encouraged idealizations of traditional systems of thought. Nowhere was this last impulse realized more effectively than in the convergence of the Griaule school’s researches (see above) and Senghor’s advocacy of négritude (196). Anthropology did have a place in the postcolonial sun, after all.

Ethnography

Good ethnography of a traditional sort was not entirely eclipsed by the desire to be relevant. Much of it was French. Dupire’s Fulani monograph (67) is outstanding even in an area which has attracted great ethnographers. Terray is well known as a theoretical Marxist of formidable analytical powers (214), but he is a fine historian and ethnographer too. His *L’Organisation Sociale des Dida* (213) describes a Southern Ivory Coast people coherently and in detail.
Nicolas's work on the Hausa of Niger peaked in the 1960s; apart from larger works, his many articles are accessible and original (e.g. 163, 164). In some ways the British tradition of fieldwork-based research was carried on more by French anthropologists after decolonization, some of them reacting against the idealism of the Griaule school and in the process reinventing the approach celebrated in *African Political Systems* (74). One British monograph, Ruel's study of a Cross River people in Cameroon (191), addresses a major topic in West African ethnology—the role of secret societies in indigenous political organization. Ruel's account of local politics on the eve of decolonization draws creatively on some of the ideas current in the modernization decade. On a larger scale, Skinner's politically oriented monograph, *The Mossi of Upper Volta* (197), provides an American example of the more traditional approach, but the tide of West African anthropology was not running with this style of research.

**Jack Goody**

If the years following decolonization saw anthropologists turning from fieldwork to history, one man's work encapsulates that transition. Jack Goody's finest achievement, *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (99), was published soon after independence. Partly an ethnography of funeral customs, it is in substance a wide-ranging comparative inquiry into the significance of property in kinship organization and social life, evoking the great Victorian jurists, such as Maine. Next he turned from studying a stateless people to the kingdom of Gonja (100, 101). Undoubtedly this experience emphasized the limits of conventional fieldwork and helped to push Goody toward those works of historical generalization for which he is perhaps best known. His output in the 1970s began with the catalytic *Technology, Tradition and the State* (102), a short collection of essays on the material foundations of state power in Africa, and extended to global contrasts between Eurasia and Africa, ranging from reproductive strategies to cooking (104, 105). Finally, these decades of research in Africa provided a launching pad for Goody's recent masterpiece on the historical origins of the European family (105a), a topic as far removed in methodology (if not in substance) from the tradition of Fortes and Radcliffe-Brown as it is possible to be. Goody's example in opening up the horizons of West African research (103) and in promoting links between the British and French schools was a central feature of the trend away from a more narrowly conceived fieldwork method in the postcolonial period.

**West African Creative Writing**

West Africans never played much of a part in the academic anthropology of their region, any more than indigenous populations elsewhere did, but in the 1960s a dazzling creative literature arose which ought to be seen as part of the
region's anthropology. The main vehicle for this movement was the novel, a vast pyramid of popular writing with work of the highest international standard at its apex (165). The region has also produced major playwrights. And the lyrics of popular music, known as "highlife," have a poetry evocative of the tango songs of Argentina between the wars. Francophone West Africans, notably Sembane, have found an enthusiastic international reception for their films. Taken together, these phenomena constitute a distinctive modern culture as vital and original as any in our century. Their focal points are the countries which were enriched most by colonialism—Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal. Two writers, Achebe and Soyinka, both Nigerians, one a novelist, the other a playwright, are strong candidates for a Nobel prize (e.g. 1, 2, 205, 206). Achebe's work in particular is a remarkable account of the two or three generations which span the colonial conquest and today's military coups. His novel *Things Fall Apart* (1) is demoralizing for anthropologists who can only aspire to capture much less at greater length in their academic ethnography. Other notable artists, such as Ekwensi (71), Armah (16), and Tutuola (218), produce vivid descriptions which point up the abstraction, even aridity of our discipline's generalizations. No social anthropologist set out to emulate Turgenev; but the West African novel has brought a whole new perspective to our understanding of what makes the region's peoples unique. Perhaps in time something of that distinctive voice will rub off on our ethnographic literature, for West African writing, as much as modern politics, has undermined our ability to assume the positivist stance of confident scientific observer on which colonial anthropology thrived.

**THE 1970s AND AFTER**

**Overview**

After the incubation period of the immediate postindependence decade, the 1970s saw a genuine renaissance of West African anthropology, an efflorescence which tailed off badly in the 1980s, as world depression and political disaster took their toll. The most significant development was the consummation of the marriage between anthropology and history, for which the 1960s had been the engagement. Great works of synthesis flowed from the historians and compelled ethnographers to take notice; but several prominent anthropologists (e.g. Goody, M. G. Smith, Terray) insured that the traffic was two-way. This was the time when the fieldwork method lost its absolute primacy in West African anthropology. Although, as we will see, traditional ethnography still flourishes, and it is by no means obvious that recent approaches have effectively refuted the claims and methods of structural-functionalism.

A new generation of collections emerged to supplant *African Political Systems* (74) and the rest, most of them more narrowly focused on the region
rather than on the continent as a whole. Moreover, they usually drew on collaboration between anthropologists, historians, geographers, and social scientists. Their titles speak of the shape of latter-day interests—slavery, migration, drought, gender. For a time it seemed that French structuralist Marxism was taking over anglophone anthropology (166); then it suddenly receded into a more minor, but still influential role. Once again West Africa was at the center of theoretical debate in the discipline. If the historians opened up the complexity of the region’s precolonial structures, the longstanding interest of West Africans in urban and peasant economies became subsumed under the tidal wave of development studies which broke in this decade. The entry of the USA on a significant scale, after the Sahelian drought of the early 1970s, played a significant part in this. Anthropologists have never been strong in the analysis of national politics, but the evolving crisis of the postcolonial states may have begun to change this. Meanwhile, there is a persistent substratum of political studies in the periphery which deserves mention. Feminism has now found a secure place in West African studies, reflecting the rise of self-consciousness among Western academic women (which was not without precedent in earlier phases of the region’s anthropology), as well as the distinctive attributes of West African women.

All of this lends support to the thesis that the old national schools of ethnography have broken up, the fragments being absorbed in an international melting pot of theoretical styles, each in its own way subordinating West African specificity to the elusive generalities of modern history. This seems to be particularly true of the British, who have been joined by many more Americans and who have been more open to the France of Lévi-Strauss and Althusser than at any time since they posthumously canonized Durkheim. French ethnography is more continuous with its earlier traditions, although here too a post-Griaule reaction has led some anthropologists to the structural-functionalism of Fortes. Be that as it may, it would be wrong to close this review without noting the richness of the ethnography still coming out of West Africa, rich both in empirical content and in theoretical significance. Three recent anglophone examples are chosen to illustrate the optimistic conclusions to be drawn from this survey.

The Rise of History

Everybody needs history. Stateless peoples like the Tallensi have their genealogies, and the new nations must have historical charters for their states. Social anthropologists traditionally adopted a radical empiricist stance toward history, choosing to find the past only in its manifestation as present actions and beliefs. Their scepticism (which made all history myth, if not bunk) was supported by the poverty of documentary evidence and the blatant manipulations of political culture. Now that the postcolonial dream has been punctured and in places has
collapsed, ethnographic conservatism looks less reactionary than it once did. Nevertheless, it has become impossible to return to the days when a tribal ethnography could be extracted from West Africa on the basis of a single period of participant observation alone. Historians have proved that the region’s past is knowable; and they have contributed vigorously to analytic debate. It is rare for two professions to operate in area studies on an equal footing, as here. West Africa’s lack of a great indigenous literate tradition gave anthropologists a head start, which they are fast relinquishing to others; but for a time they have shared the stage with historians, so that many researchers have a foot in both camps and discourse is relatively open.

A major History of West Africa (5, 6) was produced in the mid-1970s. The coverage and standard of the contributions speak eloquently of the region’s mature historiography. It is characteristic that the collection includes an interesting overview by Horton (122) of stateless societies, that is, of the peoples without history. Another synoptic landmark of this period was Hopkins’ Economic History of West Africa (119). The book was criticized for its intellectual style and selective scope. But Hopkins’ synthesis opened up a panorama which had previously been obscure, despite the existence of a great predecessor in McPhee’s precocious doctoral dissertation of 1926 (149). West Africa’s colonial era is quite well covered in English by Crowder’s concrete and durable history (54a). The French Marxist historian Suret-Canale wrote two works on Afrique Occidentale Française (210a,b) dealing with the periods up to and after World War II. Of these the second is more impressive; but frequent revisions of left-wing historiography (which saw for a time the attempted rehabilitation of the 1930s Popular Front) have not left Suret-Canale’s reputation unscathed.

Nowhere in Africa—perhaps in the world—has a precolonial polity been more thoroughly researched than the kingdom of Asante, political center of Ghana’s Akan peoples. Wilks’s monumental history (226) is in some ways the most significant publication of recent years. His account of Asante is rationalist, stressing the realpolitik of interests at the state capital and thereby lending to Asante protonationalism an air which would not seem out of place in eighteenth century Europe. Many others—McCaskie (146, 147), Arhin (15), Klein (127)—have fueled the spate of Akan historical studies. McCaskie’s brilliant articles in particular have restored a richer blend of culture and political economy to Wilks’s bureaucratic model. The Ivory Coast Akan have been as well served by French scholars. The smaller kingdom of Abron has been the object of massive researches by Terray, ranging from grand theoretical arguments with Coquery-Vidrovitch (54) over the primacy of trade in African polities (215) to minute documentation of the internal exchange of gold and slaves (prefigured in 216). And Perrot’s monograph on kingship in Anyi-Ndenye is as masterly as it is beautifully produced (175).
proof, if it were needed, that anthropology has benefited enormously from the postcolonial upsurge in historical work.

Apart from the forest kingdoms, the Moslem states of the dry savanna interior have also witnessed a boom in historical research. Baier’s economic history of the area now known as Niger (22) offers a unique glimpse into the African end of the trans-Saharan trade, while Lovejoy’s investigations into Hausa slavery culminated in a general survey of the topic (145). M. G. Smith’s earlier history of Zaria (201) was intended to be part of a set on Hausa kingdoms. So far only one more volume has been published, on Daura (203); but it is remarkable for the analytical clarity and intellectual sweep of its organization. Samori was a freebooter of the late precolonial period whose exploits have been copiously documented by Person (176) in what must be the longest monograph ever written on a West African topic. Finally, the dean of American historians, Curtin, has capped a long attempt to establish a valid account of the Atlantic slave trade (55) with a monograph on one of its principal sources, the Senegambia (56). Here too the links with anthropology are explicit. The flowering of African history in the 1970s deserves more expansive treatment. It is the most significant change in the context of anthropological research since the academic fieldworkers first made their mark.

A New Generation of Collections

Perhaps the best indicator of trends in a diffuse subject like West African studies is the choice of topics for conferences, seminars, and collections. Several of these were sponsored by the International African Institute; perhaps the most influential of their publications was that on The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa (153). Comparison with Bohanan and Dalton’s Markets in Africa (34) reveals the impact of just one decade of historical research. Meillassoux’s introduction is a tour de force, showing that the nineteenth century was not the homogeneous culmination of an unbroken precolonial past, but rather a time of crisis, as local societies were submitted to the twin shocks of a declining slave trade and growing agricultural exports. The big topic of the last decade, however, has been slavery. Again Meillassoux (154) offered a seminal introduction to a strong collection of French essays, and Miers and Kopytoff (155) produced a worthy anglophone counterpart. Slavery focused attention on early relations between the colonizers and indigenous rulers; it also forced a reevaluation of domestic institutions which had previously been classed as an expression of consensual kinship systems. For the rest, the picture is dominated by the trials of West Africa’s rural economies in the 1970s. Leftwing analysis was drawn in particular to the failures of agricultural development (11, 25, 116). The drought spawned an endless series of meetings and papers, some of which found their way into print (51, 52, 57, 58, 194). All these collaborative efforts on peasants and famine confirmed the conclusion
that the contradictions of neocolonialism are to be found mainly in the countryside. The link with the cities was explored vigorously in Amin’s collection on migration (10). His introduction mounts a comprehensive challenge to the liberal model of individual decision making and seeks to locate migrant flows in an alternative construction of West Africa’s political economy. Taken together, these initiatives speak of a downbeat realism which contrasts somewhat with the euphoria of the 1960s and even with colonial efforts to depict indigenous societies as coherent and autonomous. It is not yet clear how the mood of despair so prevalent in the 1980s will be reflected in the output of West African studies; no doubt the books of conferences will not even be published.

**Marxism**

The French debate on Althusser and structuralist Marxism, which peaked in the late 1960s, hit the anglophone world in the early 1970s and acquired for five to six years a measure of intellectual dominance in anthropology and related subjects. Everyone, it seemed, tried to master the language of French Marxism. It was doubly impressive to our marginal profession that so many of the leading practitioners were anthropologists—and Africanists too! I have written a fuller discussion of this topic elsewhere (114). Terray’s essay on Meillassoux’s Gouro monograph (214) is still the best introduction to the issues, even though his is a most ahistorical version of historical materialism. Rey’s contribution from the Congo (185)—including his seminal attack on Bohannan and Dalton (68)—is the indispensable third leg of this Althusserian trinity. Debate hinged on the power of elders over young men in West African societies. Meillassoux thought it came from their superior knowledge; Rey found a mechanism akin to class extraction of surplus labor; while Terray insisted on a functionalist interpretation of kinship as production organization. This ground was already familiar in substance to anglophone anthropologists who had identified the key role of marriage and the circulation of women in elder/junior relations (e.g. 32, 61, 93). The arguments may have seemed esoteric, but they were linked to the great issues of Parisian leftwing politics—on the Communist Party and China, for example. The intellectual standard was very high, although Terray’s concern to emulate the empiricism of the British school was not widely shared.

Meillassoux progressed in the 1970s to an articulate overview of the region’s political economy and to a sweeping general anthropology, unhappily translated into English as *Maidens, Meal and Money* (152). Rey, having pioneered an approach which came to be known as “the articulation of modes of production” (186), has recently advocated detailed studies of rural societies as a means of transcending facile talk of the African proletariat (134). On a broader front, much French writing in the 1970s was marxisant without achieving the clarity of the famous threesome. Copans’ work on Senegal (53) falls into this category. He introduced an important collection of pieces in translation by French
Marxists (195) which includes several papers by Meillassoux and two fine ethnographic studies by Augé (20) and by Pollet and Winter (178). Augé's prolific contribution has been nearer to mainstream anthropology in many ways (19); a short work in English (21) provides an introduction to his ideas. Finally, Raynaut (181, 182) has published an impressive series of articles on the Hausa of Niger, which brings Marxist analysis to bear on contemporary social realities at a fairly specific level. Now that the honeymoon with French Marxism is over, we might ask what its initial appeal was. In the context of West African anthropology, the failure of structural-functionalism to survive decolonization left an intellectual gap which history, with its penchant for particular facts and concrete myths, could not fill. Marxism advertised itself as a materialist science of history, even when, as here, the logic and method of the specific approach were quite similar to those of structural-functionalism. By embracing structuralist Marxism, after their fashion, anglophone anthropologists could reject their past while retaining familiar ways of thinking. Later they were able to dispense with this crutch and return to a less theoretical eclecticism. Nevertheless, the French Marxists brought to West African studies a sense of wider purpose and a power of reasoning which has not been seen since the British school was at its height.

Development

The long tradition of urban and peasant studies in West African anthropology was continued in the 1970s. Once again the Yoruba received more than their fair share of attention. Eades's short overview (69) is an excellent guide to the Yoruba literature. Lloyd produced works on topics ranging from perceptions of inequality (143) to shanty towns (144). Peel's history of Ilesha is the best recent study of social change in the region (172). Berry's account of Southwestern Nigeria's cocoa farmers (27) is a worthy complement to Hill's Ghanaian work (117). Sudarkasa's research on Yoruba women at home and in Ghana (210) reflects her pioneering status as a black American female anthropologist. Peace's study of factory workers in a Lagos suburb (171a) has great originality; and Aronson's The City Is Our Farm (17) is a concrete study of migrants' lives. If Akan history is outstanding, Yorubology is much the most advanced sector of research into modern West Africa. Elsewhere in Nigeria, Hill's investigations into the Hausa peasantry near Kano have been first rate, especially Rural Hausa (118). Watts' recent monograph on a similar area (222) has justifiably attracted considerable attention. Uchendu's Igbo ethnography (219) is a rare example of work by a native anthropologist. Burnham's book on the Gbaya of Northern Cameroon (40a) makes a successful link between late precolonial history and the economic anthropology of the modern period. Two influential products of Cambridge's Ghana industry are Oppong's study of matrilineal marriage among Akan civil servants in Accra (167) and Schildkrout's People of
the Zongo (192), the most significant work on ethnicity to emerge from West Africa since A. Cohen’s Ibadan book (47). Gugler and Flanagan (108a) provide the most up-to-date review of urban studies in the region.

These painstaking ethnographies of West Africa’s complex societies have been overshadowed—in publicity, if not in seriousness of context—by a deluge of studies oriented toward “development.” This movement has three main strands: research financed by or closely connected to American aid; Marxist-influenced work often portraying itself as “political economy”; and studies carried out under the auspices of the French government, notably ORSTOM. The Institute for Development Anthropology at SUNY, Binghamton has sponsored a volume on the Sahel (39) which is representative of American applied anthropology. Much else in this field remains unpublished. Horowitz (120) and Swift (211) have greatly advanced our knowledge of West African pastoralism, the latter most recently in the Niger Livestock Development Project. A collection of agricultural case studies under Netting’s direction (162) is of the highest quality. Amin’s synthetic corpus on underdevelopment with an African face has inspired much critical writing on West Africa. His Unequal Development (9) contains the full theory, while a work specifically on West Africa (8) is rather less interesting than his early case study of the Ivory Coast (7). Some of the best marxisant writing has been on Senegal, where Copans (53) and Adams (3) deserve special mention. Derman’s innovative study of Guinée (59) is a rare American example of ethnography influenced by Marxism. Gutkind and Wallerstein (109) present a number of papers on African political economy; and several of the collections referred to above lean in this direction. The output of French geographers, anthropologists, agronomists etc has been staggering. Gallais’ work on the Inner Delta region of Mali (88) offers a consistent overview of relations between herders and peasants. Of many others, Boutillier (36), Dozon (62), Raynaut and Reboul (183) are conspicuous in having brought their ethnographic talents to bear on development problems. Finally, Rimmer’s The Economies of West Africa (188) is the first regional survey of the national economies formed some 25 years ago.

What has all this activity meant for West African anthropology? First, it has provided jobs and research funds for ethnographers. Second, it has opened up our subject to explicit considerations of policy. Third, it has stimulated genuinely new understanding, of interactions between different specialist groups, for instance. “Development” is a catch phrase for our institutional equivalent of colonialism—directed change under Western leadership. In the 1970s, anthropologists came to terms with development in this sense as a necessary part of their collective existence in West Africa. It would be dishonest to pass over my own interest in the topic of this section. My original research into the economy of Accra’s slums was undertaken as an exercise in the sociology of modernization (urban branch). An early publication (111) coined an expression “the
informal sector” which helped to define a new bureaucratic interest in the Third World’s urban poor. Eventually I turned to a historical survey of West Africa’s political economy with the focus on agriculture (113); the annotated bibliography of this work would be a useful complement to the present paper. This personal shift from small-scale urban anthropology to the history of regional development reflects a major trend in West African studies. We are all global thinkers now, but can we still do the ethnography?

**Politics on the Periphery**

After the heady days of the 1960s, when political scientists like Apter wrote confident monographs on Africa’s “new nations,” much of the best work done on politics has looked at local realities in a national context. Dunn’s excellent collection (64) offers short case studies of the principal countries; and the smaller anglophone states, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, have lent themselves to encapsulated summary (44, 137). But it is the lower level studies that have been outstanding. Dunn’s collaboration with the anthropologist A. Robertson (65) situates the remote Brong-Ahafo region in the wider framework of Ghana’s political evolution. Cruise O’Brien’s two monographs on an Islamic brotherhood in Senegal, the Mourides (54b, c), are of exceptional anthropological quality. Much the same could be said of Paden’s *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (170). Ladouceur’s overview of politics in Northern Ghana (131) is indispensable to comprehension of the voluminous ethnographic literature on the area; while Staniland’s Dagomba history exemplifies the progress made by political scientists in synthesizing the ideas and methods of several disciplines. As before, anthropologists have been backward in addressing a topic made for them—politics seen from below. The major exception to this is Owusu (169) who, like Busia in the colonial period (41), stepped out of the rut and studied politics in his own Akan area. The most prominent issue of our times is the crisis facing West Africa’s postcolonial states. Since 1979 especially, Ghana and several other nations have been on the brink of collapse. Research is much more difficult under these conditions, but the moral and intellectual pressure on anthropologists to make sense of these phenomena should be overwhelming.

**Gender Relations**

Boserup’s *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (35) gave feminist anthropology a systematic framework for linking West Africa’s women to the developments of the postcolonial era. Later borrowings from Marxism invested these discussions with the importance of “political economy.” I have summarized male/female relations elsewhere (113, pp. 142–45). The point is that women in many parts of the region strike outsiders as being unusually independent. This is especially true of the marketing sphere. Yet traditional social
structure gave power unequivocally to men, as functionalist and Marxist analyses of marriage exchanges have repeatedly claimed. Both colonial and postcolonial societies have also been dominated by men at the top; but lower down the pecking order women often exercise more clout than Western housewives. Market women have been used as scapegoats for economic failure by male military regimes. It is an intriguing picture and one which attracted some of the best anthropological studies of gender relations anywhere. Oppong’s collection (168) is up-to-date and rather uneven. It does, however, reveal the extraordinary variety of ethnographic findings in the region. Several of the contributors to this volume have written cogently on this and related topics: Ottenberg, Etienne, Sanjek, Schildkrout, Peil, and Brydon (whose paper is the best single contribution). The list of major writers on sex divisions in the last decade defies further description: Sudarkasa (210), Little (140), McCormack (148), Pellow (174), C. Robertson (190), Guyer (110), S. Ardener (14), Roberts (189), Vidal (221), Clignet (46), Bisilliat (28), just to name a few. Of these, Guyer’s comparison of the Bete and Yoruba division of labor is part of a first-rate anthropological project; and Roberts has done more than most to integrate a feminist perspective with the critical line on political economy epitomized by the radical journal, Review of African Political Economy (e.g. 184).

It is hard to say what will be the long-term residue of this remarkable outpouring. Already enough doubt has been cast on traditional ethnographic models to undermine their grip on our minds. Thus, for example, it has been argued that the development cycle of domestic groups is biased toward males and that descent theory overstated the influence of rule-bound corporations dominated by men. Such challenges are bound to be salutory for the profession. On the other hand, the historical dependence of women’s liberation on capitalist and socialist development tends to be overlooked by romantics searching for authentic precapitalist examples of female freedom in West Africa. The emancipation of women is a global force of greater political significance even than decolonization. The intellectual movement it has stimulated has just begun to transform West African anthropology.

What Happened to Ethnography?

The tradition of writing ethnography is far from dead in West Africa; and in some ways the French could be said to have done more to uphold that tradition in recent years than their anglophone counterparts. Much of their work is modeled on the Griaule school’s method of cultural exegesis, modified perhaps to take more explicit account of psychology or linguistics. More remarkably, the British structural-functionalists have enjoyed a belated vogue in Paris, as several West African ethnographers took up the idea of fieldwork geared toward the analysis of concrete social organization. Dumas-Champion’s mono-
graph on the Masa of Chad (63) draws inspiration directly from *African Political Systems*; and Tardits' (212) combination of ethnography and history owes much to the Bohannans. As before, intensive collaboration in a few places has been more typical of French efforts than British. One organization, devoted to the study of systems of thought under the leadership of Cartry, produced an eight-volume series on sacrifice not long ago (42). Izard, one of the leading ethnographers, is a convert from history (123); and Adler's account of divine kingship in Chad (4) matches Perrot's Anyi history (175) but goes in for a rather more formal theoretical apparatus. From the outside it does seem that French anthropology, despite the original contributions of its Marxists and historians, has stayed closer to the concerns of colonial ethnography. In this sense, the shocks of decolonization have had less effect on the corpus of writing than has been the case for the British. It would be idle to ask why, when the proposition itself is so tenuous.

While J. Goody applied himself to the task of global comparison, the work of the Cambridge school, with its base in Northern Ghana, was carried on most notably by E. Goody. Her early work on Gonja (89) takes up the traditional concerns of kinship and marriage in an area where descent organization is weak. Since then she has branched out into a unique cluster of investigations, based partly on Gonja but also on research outside Africa. These include socialization, fostering, symbolic interaction, and craft occupations (90–92). An interest in social psychology is one source of underlying unity; but Goody’s methods are extremely diverse, combining statistical and historical techniques with small-scale fieldwork observations. Brown’s work on the rituals of Mamprusi kingship (40) is much nearer the interests of French researchers in the Voltaic area than to the current mainstream of British anthropology. Her mentor, Fortes, inspires more research these days in Paris than in his own university. This is not to deny that good ethnography still comes out of Britain—Jackson’s sensitive study of the Kuranko of Sierra Leone (124) is one example. This section on the 1970s and after concludes with a selection of three monographs which keep alive the spirit of theoretically adventurous empiricism that has always marked the best anglophone work in West Africa.

Verdon’s book on the Abutia Ewe of Southern Ghana (220) would not be a universal choice. His dedication to a method of “operational analysis,” based on systematic reworking of old conceptual vocabulary, strikes some as unbendingly Cartesian—not for him the muddled realism of most British ethnography. Yet no individual has done more to sustain interest in the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, and the other founders of classical kinship theory. The Ewe lack a segmentary lineage system and this led Verdon into a reexamination of the “descent” concept. His fieldwork materials are well organized and his analysis is both original and rigorous. It may be that these problems no longer command a serious audience in anthropology. If so, it is a pity. Riesman’s
Freedom in Fulani Social Life (187) is by far the most delightful monograph published in the last decade. It started out as a Sorbonne doctoral thesis (Société et Liberté chez les Peuls), and it represents a unique synthesis of American and French elements. The topic is personal autonomy in a pastoralist culture. The method of exposition is remarkable—first a fairly conventional, “objective” account of social structure; then a variety of subjective approaches to the problem, experimenting with novel approaches for psychology, language, and philosophy. The freshness and idiosyncrasy of this book make it one of a kind. Perhaps if more anthropologists conceived of their task as creative writing, our ethnography would be more humane and revealing.

Finally, Peel’s Ijeshas and Nigerians (172) addresses what is surely the pressing issue for West African anthropology today—the incorporation of local communities into new nation states. His canvas covers the whole modern period since long before colonialism. His method is historical narrative, but the spirit is ethnographic. Peel’s meticulous scholarship and imaginative sweep do more to illuminate the complexities of Yoruba society than any other single work. Most of the great themes of postcolonial anthropology find a place here—forest kingdoms, urbanization, export production, trade, modern politics, ethnicity and so on. If any recent monograph offers a model that is likely to be imitated in coming years, this is it. The demands of ethnography and history are reconciled and a new art form, comparable to the scientific field report of colonial anthropology, struggles to emerge.

General Conclusions

The arrival of academic anthropology in West Africa during the late colonial period produced a creative outburst of great intellectual confidence. British structural-functionalism was an integrated theory and method; it yielded results; and it could be reproduced in universities. Its practitioners were well aware of the problems they faced in abstracting local societies from the wider arena of history and politics, but they counted the benefits of prolonged fieldwork more than adequate compensation. Their best monographs are a rare blend of concrete description and analytical rigor; they are a lesson on how to think through first-hand experience of the exotic. Decolonization ended all that, at least for the British. We have been overwhelmed by the sense of a world turned upside down, remaking itself almost by the day. We have lost any certainty that small-scale communities are valid subjects of study. We have turned to grand speculation about continental, even world history, and to the anxious paranoia of political economy. Who can deny the gains or would wish to restore an anthropology without history? Yet an uncomfortable feeling persists that the old ethnography may have been pushed to one side, but its claims have not been decisively refuted. Its vitality in recent French work suggests that the demise of structural-functionalism has been announced pre-
maturely. (French neocolonialism is more alive in West Africa too.) The ethnographic canons of colonial anthropology are still compelling, however difficult to implement, and the weaknesses of speculative generalization have not been overcome by a new self-confident African history. There is some evidence that the pendulum, having swung between its antithetical extremes in the last two decades, may now be describing a narrower, more synthetic arc where history and ethnography are fruitfully combined. We cannot recapitulate the homogeneity of national schools in the 1940s; there are too many of us now. But the harsh climate of the 1980s forces us to take stock of the immediate postcolonial era and to concentrate our efforts on the future. West Africa will not become easier for anthropologists to study; but its peoples are still fundamentally free, and the region is likely to remain a crucible of original thought in our discipline for decades to come.

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CONTENTS

OVERVIEW

An Individual's Participation in American Archaeology, 1928–1985, James B. Griffin 1

ARCHAEOLOGY

Ceramic Ethnoarchaeology, Carol Kramer 77
Context and Chronology of Early Man in the Americas, William N. Irving 529

BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology, Evolution, and "Scientific Creationism," James N. Spuhler 103
Dental Evidence for the Diet of Australopithecus, Richard F. Kay 315
Human Genetic Distance Studies: Present Status and Future Prospects, L. B. Jorde 343
Sexual Dimorphism, David W. Frayer and Milford H. Wolpoff 429
Bioanthropological Research in Developing Countries, Rebecca Huss-Ashmore and Francis E. Johnston 475

LINGUISTICS

Modular Theories of Grammar, Ann K. Farmer 25
Text and Discourse, Aaron V. Cicourel 159
Mayan Linguistics: Where Are We Now?, Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman 187
Status and Style in Language, Judith T. Irvine 557

REGIONAL STUDIES

The Social Anthropology of West Africa, Keith Hart 243
Chicano Studies, 1970–1984, Renato Rosaldo 405

CULTURAL-SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Peasant Ideologies in the Third World, Joel S. Kahn 49
The Use of Statistics in Sociocultural Anthropology, Michael Chibnik 135

(continued) viii
CONTENTS (continued) ix

Mining: Anthropological Perspectives, Ricardo Godoy 199
The Interface of Nursing and Anthropology, Molly C. Dougherty and Toni Tripp-Reimer 219
Issues in Divine Kingship, Gillian Feeley-Harnik 273
Sustenance and Symbol: Anthropological Studies of Domesticated Animals, Eugenia Shanklin 375

INDEXES

Author Index 583
Subject Index 601
Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 7–14 621
Cumulative Index of Chapter Titles, Volumes 7–14 623