ON THE INADEQUACY OF THE CONCEPT
OF THE 'TRADITIONAL STATE'

Illustrated with Ethnographic Material on Nanun, Ghana

Peter Skalník

The problem

This essay tries to avoid the usual typological exercise à la Fortes
and Evans-Pritchard (the opposition of societies with centralised
authority to those lacking it) or Radcliffe-Brown (monopoly of the
use or threat of physical force versus no such monopoly) which has
been repeated in various forms in most anthropological writing on
politics since *African Political Systems* appeared almost 50 years ago
(Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Instead, I
argue that the concept of 'the state' has been developed as part of
the unique modern European model of power during the last several
hundred years, and as such is largely inapplicable to most non-
European situations and to some less-typical European historical
cases.

The modern European usage of the term 'the state' goes back to
Machiavelli (1513), and it is in fact 'the nation-state' which is meant
when reference is made to 'the state' in most political and historical
writing on the subject. The definition of the state as it is known in
modern European history is based on the recognition of nationalism
and the existence of politically organised nations. Whether one
departs from a contract or a conflict theory of the state (cf. Service
1975, 1978), the fact remains that the state's power is derived from

its overlap with the politicised nation. This overlapping of 'state' and 'nation' did not take place in non-European areas.[1]
The major question which I pose here is: What is the source and nature of power in the polities usually studied by anthropologists? What does politics mean in those polities? Why is it that these polities do not and cannot develop into nation-states? To make my argument as clear as possible I use data from my field research into the functioning of two West African indigenous political systems, those of the Nanumba and the Konkomba in northeastern Ghana.[2]

The editors of *African Political Systems* and the whole school of anthropologists and historians who wrote in its wake, together with

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1.   The nation-state is one of the most powerful inventions in history. It legitimates state power in the eyes of all people, not by blind reverence of a ruler or principles of a religious nature, but by appealing to reason and by the representation of all citizens in decision-making bodies. In that sense we cannot speak of 'citizenship' in any non-European country, including Japan prior to 1945. In a nation-state most if not all people identify themselves, for the first time in history, with the state and are able to fight for it not because they worship the ruler as a god, but because they are convinced that they co-decide their destiny within the framework of membership in a nation and its state. The first national people's army was Napoleon's army. Even though the nationalist enthusiasm of the French was exploited and abused by a megalomaniac individual, it was a fact that French nationalism was born and put into action and became a force which could not be beaten except when Napoleon attempted to export it by conquest.

many African, American, Asian, Australian, Soviet and other continental European anthropologists and historians have operated with the concept of the state without submitting it to critical evaluation in the light of data from non-European areas or less familiar periods of European history.[3] Thus, the largely Eurocentric concept of 'the state' was applied and 'states' were 'found' whereever there was hierarchy, stratification or centralisation of executive functions. 'States' were structurally opposed to the 'stateless' or 'acephalous' societies which did not develop centralised decision-making, etc. The modern European concept of the state and the European type of state organisation were identified semantically with political forms elsewhere, despite substantial differences in the nature of power and other structural and functional characteristics.

The dichotomy state/stateless is in fact a continuation of the evolutionist models which prevailed in previous periods in the history of anthropology, such as Morgan's triad savagery-barbarism-civilisation in which the state is supposed to have emerged during the transition from 'barbarism' to 'civilisation'. More recent evolutionist models are those of Fried (1967), who proposes the sequence egalitarian-rank-stratified-state, and Service, whose sequence is band-tribe-chiefdom-state (Service 1971). Similarly, Smith (1985) proposes a six-member typology (common-wealth-confederation-dominion-bureaucracy-technocracy-transitional). Explanation through typology likewise prevails in Soviet writing on 'class and state formation' or 'early-class state', whereby Morgan's and Engels' typologies are only slightly modified by reference to concrete data on non-European 'states' (Pershits 1976; cf. Gellner 1979).[4] Such typological experiments have not contributed much to the understanding of the nature of politics by antropologists.

The distinction of 'primary' (or 'pristine') and 'secondary' states (cf. Cohen and Service 1978), has limited significance because it focuses on the explanation of the origin of the state by reconstructing various steps leading to state organisation but leaves aside the question of what the state is. The same applies to other adjectives

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3. The outstanding exception is the work of the late Pierre Clastres (1977).

4. It would be wrong to suggest that there have been no attempts made to develop concepts which incorporate the specific nature of political processes studied by anthropologists into the descriptive concepts used in political anthropology. The concept of the 'segmentary state' (Southall 1956, 1965) is an example of this.

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like 'traditional' (Balandier 1972:123-157; Ecsedy 1972), 'primitive' (Claessen 1979; Kaberry 1957; Mair 1962), 'tribal' (Malinowski 1944; Gluckman 1963, 1965; Korana-shvili 1978) and 'pre-colonial', all of which have been used rather haphazardly and without much ethnographic or theoretical justification. Perhaps the concept of the 'indigenous state' is the most neutral among all these adjectives (cf. Skalník 1983:27).

Some reseachers have used the term 'kingdom' instead of 'state' (e.g. Dampierre 1967; Lloyd 1965, 1971; Forde and Kaberry 1967; Smith 1969; Quinn 1972; Ingham 1975; Izard 1985; Kent 1970; Mair 1977; Tardits 1980), while a host of others have been fascinated by the old Frazerian riddle of divine or sacred kingship (Abélès 1981; Bäck 1981; Claessen 1984; de Heusch 1958, 1962, 1972, 1982, 1984; Adler 1982; Muller 1980, 1981; Oosten 1984). Other writers use terms such as 'civilisation' (Service 1975), 'empire' (Sedov 1967), 'monarchy' (Lewis 1965; Skalník 1975) or 'polity' (Goody 1971). The latter, again, seems to be most neutral of all. However, it is not a solution to the problem of the concept of the state to use one word merely to avoid another one. Until we understand the specific nature of political processes in societies studied by anthropologists we will be unable to account for the inappropriateness of a term like 'traditional state'.

The recently developed concept of the 'early state' for which I am partly responsible (cf. Claessen and Skalník 1978 and 1981) also relies too much on evolutionist typology (from 'inchoate' to 'typical' and 'transitional' types of the early state). This bias was partially balanced by a determination to discover the nature of archaic polities. But the term 'state' as such was never questioned. The whole enterprise implies that there is an essential link between early and modern forms of 'the state'. More recent, detailed analysis, however, confirms my argument in the present article that this link is specifically European and that the rest of the world did not develop modern forms of statehood without decisive European influence (Claessen 1987). Even China and Japan built their modern state organisations in response to heavy European impact.[5]

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5.   The European power model with the state as crucial institution developed gradually from classical Antiquity onwards. It was forged in the (mostly victorious) confrontations with non- European peoples and polities. Thus modern European nation-states can be seen as the result of successful tests during which the Europeans defeated invading Persians, Phoenicians, Arabs, Avars, Tatars/Mongols and Turks and finally turned to conquer the rest of the world during the

The Nanumba and the Konkomba

During my field research in Ghana, I have been concerned with the contrasting political cultures - the different ways whereby groups of people deal with power and related questions - of two West African ethno-political systems, the Nanumba and the Konkomba. My aim is to compare them with each other and to illuminate the differences from and similarities to the European state model.
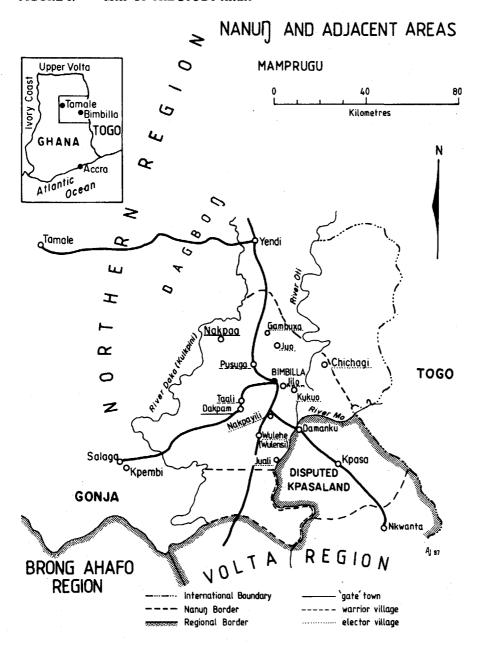
'*Nanumba*' (sing. *Nanuna*) is the self-designation of several tens of thousand of Nanuni-speakers. The Nanumba consider themselves the landlords of Nanun, a territory whose inhabitants are subject to the sovereignty of the Bimbilla naam, or chieftaincy and thus are expected to recognise the authority of the paramount chief, the Bimbilla Naa. In a modern administrative sense, Nanun practically coincides with the Nanumba District which is a part of the Northern Region of Ghana (the exception is the disputed area known as Kpasaland, which is in the Volta Region - cf. Skalník 1986a, 1986b)). It is however characteristic of this sort of polity that Nanun has no precisely-defined boundaries.[6] The fact that Nanuni is practically identical to Dagbani, spoken by the neighbouring Dagbamba (known also as the Dagomba), along with the non-existence of any formal criteria of citizenship, has probably contributed to a state of affairs in which people move very easily between the two polities, Nanun and Dagbon. Until 1981 they did not bother much about the question of their identity. Identity came to the fore only in confrontation with peoples who speak very different languages, like the Gonja or Konkomba. Even today many Nanumba identify themselves as Dagbamba even though they recognize the authority of a chief who has been installed by the Bimbilla Naa. Furthermore, many women and men have come from Dagbon (and even Mamprugu, the northern neighbour of Dagbon) to settle in Nanun and so do not feel any ethnic allegiance. The fact that during the three decades since the independence of Ghana chieftaincy has been a less prominent factor in people's lives than it presumably once was also helps explain the fact that people have not had the opportunity to identify themselves around ethnic symbols. However, as I am going to show, the conflict between the Nanumba and the Konkomba has not only helped to

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absolutist and the liberal capitalist eras.
6.   This lack of clear boundaries may both reduce and enhance friction between chieftaincies and people.

define their respective ethnicities but has also made clear the concept of Nanumba-ness as distinct from that of Dagbamba-ness.

FIGURE 1:   MAP OF THE STUDY AREA

NANUŊ AND ADJACENT AREAS

- ─ · ─ · ─   International Boundary
- ─ ─ ─ ─   Nanuŋ Border
- ▨▨▨▨▨   Regional Border
- ─────   'gate' town
- ─ ─ ─ ─   warrior village
- ···········   elector village

Historically, the Nanumba emerged from the confrontation of the (most probably) Nawuri-speaking autochthonous population and a militarily advanced people who immigrated into Nanun a few centuries ago. Of the former very little is known except that they were sedentary agriculturalists practising shifting cultivation, whose communities were organized around shrines (*boxole*) of natural gods of a totemic nature. Their leader was the Dalana. They put their dead in trees.[7]

The immigrants were led by Nmantambu, one of the sons of Naa Gbewaa, and they migrated from Dagbon in a southeasterly direction. Several other chiefly polities of Northern Ghana and Burkina Faso (with the notable exception of Gonja) claim common origin because they are believed to have been founded by either sons (Mamprugu, Dagbon and Nanun) or grandchildren (Moogo) or greatgrandchildren of Naa Gbewaa (cf. Skalník 1978). The Bimbilla Naa calls the Ya Naa of Yendi and the Na Yiri of Mamprugu 'my brother' (*m'mabia*). Naa Gbewaa himself, according to different versions of the foundation myth, arrived from the East, most likely from the area of Gurma in modern Burkina Faso.

Contemporary Nanumba ethnic identity is derived to a large extent from shared knowledge of the 'mythical charter' connected with the story of Nmantambu. Nanun actually derives its name from *naa* (chief) and *nuu* (hand). According to the legend, Nmantambu's younger brother, Sitobu, the founder of Dagbon, asked Nmantambu to protect him from enemies to the southeast by establishing a settlement in that direction. He pointed his hand toward the southeast. Another version has it that all three brothers split from a lake called Bagri in Dagbon.

Nanumba ethnicity is primarily based on the existence of a *naam* (polity), not upon community of language. As this is not the place for discussing the early history of Nanun we leave this fascinating topic to turn to the question of Konkomba ethnicity.[8]

According to David Tait (1961) who did extensive anthropological research among the Konkomba, this 'tribe' has emerged only very

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7. The villages of Dalaanyili and Jilo are instances of dual polities because their inhabitants are believed to be autochthons even though their chiefs are nominated by the immigrant chief, the Bimbilla Naa.
8. 'Ethnicity' is here understood as the manipulation of cultural symbols for political aims.

recently as a result of a process of amalgamation during the colonial (and post-colonial) period. They were originally divided into a number of 'subtribes', each having its own name. Until recently there was no unified Konkomba language. Likpokpaln (the Konkomba language) is the result of efforts of the linguists of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation, who designed its alphabet, formalised its grammar and published the first textbooks on the basis of the most central, Sanguli dialect. The Konkomba speak various, only marginally mutually-intelligible dialects. The wars between the 'subtribes', which had been common, were discontinued by the colonial conquest, and more contact exists today between the various 'sub-tribes'.

The Konkomba, whose numbers in Ghana may have reached several hundred thousand (no 'ethnic' census has been taken since 1960), are the autochtonous inhabitants of the eastern part of present-day Dagbon. Yendi, the capital of Dagbon, was originally a Konkomba settlement. According to oral history, the Konkomba were pushed to the east by the invading Dagbamba, who, after the 18th century wars with the Gonja, were pushed eastward by the victorious Gonja. The Konkomba lived for several centuries on the infertile lands around the upper Oti river with Saboba as their center (Tamakloe 1931). In the wake of a bloody conflict with the Dagbamba, the Konkomba began to look for new lands in the second third of the 20th century. Their first refuge was Nanun where they today outnumber the Nanumba two or three to one. Their cultural centre remained, however, in Saboba. Konkomba ethnicity has been bolstered by literacy and evangelical campaigns, but also, without any doubt, by the conflicts with the Dagbamba and more recently with the Nanumba.

To summarise, Nanumba ethnicity is built around a foundation myth which stresses the role of the *naam* or chieftaincy as its uniting principle - in ideological terms, it is the basis of the common identity of the Nanumba - whereas the Konkomba have emerged as a 'tribe' only recently as a result of external pressures. Both ethnicities were historically, however, relatively loose. This was due to the ritual and linguistic proximity between the Nanumba and the Dagbamba and the internal fragmentation of the Konkomba, who have had a weak linguistic identity and no uniting chieftaincy.

The neo-traditional chiefdom of Nanun

As mentioned above the identity of the Nanumba is connected with
the *naam*. The chiefs are only incumbents of the *naam*. The transla-
tion into English of the native concept *naam* is very difficult as it
may mean 'power', 'authority' or 'office'. I believe that it can best be
described as 'chieftaincy', as the name for chief (*naa*, pl. *naanima*)
suggests.

In order to explain the intricacies of political structure and process
in Nanun one has to start with the sacred villages. There are four
sacred villages in Nanun: Dalaanyili, Ponaayili, Binda and Duuni. They
are sacred because they contain shrines which symbolise the
relationship between Nmantambu and his retinue, on the one hand,
and the autochthons on the other. This relationship is ritual, or
politico-ritual. Nmantambu and his chiefly people did not actually
fight their way into Nanun, except for a few places where they were
met with resistance. The emergence of the common ethnic group,
Nanumba, is based on a kind of politico-ritual pact. The ritual
specialists are the earthpriests (*tindanima*, sing. *tindana*, lit.
custodians of the earth, *tina*) who accepted the chiefly people with
their institution of *naam* on the condition that *naam* can only be
renewed with the sanction of the earthpriests.

The paramount chief, the Bimbilla Naa, who is a direct descendant
of Nmantambu and a member of one of the two chiefly houses,
resides in Nanun's capital Bimbilla and enskins (installs) most chiefs
in Nanun, including those in the sacred villages. However, his
relationship with the latter is marked by ritual avoidance and fear.
The Bimbilla Naa's funeral cannot be ritually - i.e. ultimately
- performed unless the ritual people from Dalaanyili and Binda
villages, led by their 'chief' Dalana (known also as Yidana, husband),
proclaim him dead and perform a series of secret ritual activities on
his grave. According to the founding legend, Dalana was the only
chief whom Nmantambu 'met' in Nanun. When I once asked the
Bimbilla Naa for permission to go to Dalaanyili he laughed ingenuous-
ly and said that he could not give me such permission: he has no
direct authority over Dalaanyili.

Similarly, the Bimbilla Naa enskins a female relative as the chief-
tainess of Ponaayili (lit. female chief's house), but cannot see her
again and is not allowed to go to this small place where some very
secret paraphernalia connected with *naam* are kept. The chieftainess,
Ponaa (lit. female chief) never comes to Bimbilla during the Bimbilla
Naa's lifetime. She and her male co-chief Kpandixli come to Bimbilla

in the time of *naakuli*, the Bimbilla Naa's ritual funeral, to supervise the procedure of the funeral. Without them the chief's funeral cannot be performed.

The fourth sacred village, Duuni, is the place where according to the founding myth Nmantambu died and where (according to some versions of the legend) his sister was also buried. There is a sacred room in Duuni, specially kept and renewed by Duuni people, in which Nmantambu was to be buried. But his body disappeared before it could be buried, presumably to the pond called Baxri in Dagbon, where the other children of Naa Gbewaa also rest. Although the Bimbilla Naa officially enskins the Duu Naa (chief of Duuni), he sends his elders with the chiefly gown (*kparba*) who put it on him in his own hall. All other chiefs have to come to Bimbilla to be enskinned. The Bimbilla Naa must never see the Duu Naa. If he travels on the road to Yendi he will be blindfolded when he passes near Duuni. The Bakpab Naa, chief of the nearest village to Duuni, is also not allowed to go to Duuni but he can see the Duu Naa when the latter visits Bakpaba.

The ritual underpinning of the Nanumba political system is even more obvious when we realise that the earthpriests are warriors (*sapashinima*) as well. Originally the autochthonous inhabitants of Nanun were hunters and the function of warriors must have developed from their hunting occupation. Thus in their dual function of earthpriests and warriors they are guarantors of the *naam*, both legitimising and defending it. That is why the warrior villages surround Bimbilla (Jilo, Ganguyili, Pusuga) or are near to other important settlements of Nanun - Nakpaa, Dakpam, Bakpaba, etc. The warriors have no claim to *naam*. But they know the rules of chieftaincy and are on guard against its abuse.

Another group with politico-ritual status in Nanun are the *naakpamba* (sing. *naakpema*) or chiefly elders. They are considered senior to the chief of Bimbilla and this status is reflected linguistically. For example the Juo Naa and the Wulehe Naa call the Bimbilla Naa 'my grandson' (*n'yanga*). They are addressed as 'my grandfather' (*n'yaba*) by the Bimbilla Naa, who in turn is viewed as 'father' of all chieftaincies which derive from Nmantambu. The Wulehe Naa and a number of other *naakpamba* occupying important villages to the north-east, east and south of Bimbilla are the electors of the Bimbilla Naa ('kingmakers' in colonial terminology). The most important of these are the Juo Naa, the Lanjiri Naa (the chief of Kukuo village) and the Gambux Naa. Others are the Jilo Naa, the Chichax Naa, the Dibsi Naa (Nakpayili village chief) and the Juali Naa. These chiefly

elders very rarely if ever meet. Their status is very special: they have no right to compete for the *naam* of Bimbilla. Some of them are certainly of autochthonous origin although they do not stress that; the *naakpamba* like to be less conspicuous than ordinary chiefs, but their influence on the whole Nanumba polity is considerable.

The Kpatihi Naa has a very special position. My information indicates that his function of 'skinmaker' - a ceremonialist who enskins chiefs on behalf of the Bimbilla Naa - was only recently introduced into Nanun, probably under the influence of Dagbon. But the Kpatihi family is also believed to have come with Nmantambu in his retinue. At any rate the present Kpatihi Naa Ponadoo, enskinned by members of his own family (the only dignitaries to enskin themselves) on 4th January 1983, had more influence on the procedures of the Bimbilla Naa's funeral than any of the electors. With the exception of the Jilo Naa who resided until recently in Bimbilla (he was the only Nanumba chief who was literate, in fact a teacher working in the Bimbilla district office of the Ghana Education Service), all other *naakpamba* live in their respective villages. Kpatihi, who stays in Bimbilla, has easy access to the court of the Bimbilla Naa and thus exerts considerable influence upon the decision-making at the centre of the Nanumba polity. Literate Nanumba familiar with the organisation of the chief's court in the Akan societies of southern Ghana often describe him as the 'chief linguist' at the Bimbilla Naa's court.

Although all who are ceremonially enskinned bear the same term *naa* after their title - i.e. are considered chiefs - it is only the members of the Nmantambu line (divided into two sublines) who can compete for the village *naams* within the hierarchy of chieftaincies which has the *naam* of Bimbilla at its apex. Only they are referred to as *naabihi* (sing. *naabia*) or 'chiefly children', both in the sense of belonging to the Nmantambu chiefly line and of being children of a particular chief in that line.

The *naam* of Bimbilla is open to all members of the Nmantambu *dunoli* (gate). There are two sublines, Gbugmayili (lion's house) and Banyili (house of the bangle). They have existed for a number of generations and the *naam* of Bimbilla alternates between them. In practice this means that if the present Bimbilla Naa is from Gbugmayili (as was the case in 1978 when I began my fieldwork in Nanun) after his death (which occurred 1981) a member of the Banyili will become the Bimbilla Naa (this in fact happened in 1983). As the maxim goes, 'If the sceptre of Banyili is put down, that of Gbugmayili should be taken up. If then the sceptre of Gbugmayili is put down, that of Banyili should be taken up'. Today this rule

appears to be an absolute imperative, but tradition tells of a third house, Suburi, which lost its chance in the past and although still officially entitled to the *naam*, has no chance of success. The last Bimbilla Naa from the Suburi chiefly house was Naa Sulgu (Falcon) who allegedly betrayed the Nanumba and thus was condemned to oblivion.

Competition for the paramount *naam* of Bimbilla has become so reglemented that the most likely person to win is the incumbent of the *naam* of Nakpaa, in the case of Gbugmayili, and of the *naam* of Dakpam for Banyili. The chieftaincies of Nakpaa and Dakpam are thus 'gates' to the *naam* of Bimbilla. For example, Bimbilla Naa Dasana (1959-1981) from Gbugmayili was the Nakpaa Naa before he became the Bimbilla Naa. The present Bimbilla Naa Abarika (enskinned 1983) from Banyili was the Dakpam Naa before he ascended to Bimbilla. But this has not always been the case. For example, the Bimbilla Naa Natogmah (1945-1957), older full brother of the present Bimbilla Naa, became the Bimbilla Naa straight from being the incumbent of the less important *naam* of Gbungbaliga because the Dakpam chieftaincy was vacant at that time.

The chieftaincies of certain villages belong traditionally to Gbugmayili, and others to Banyili. The geographical distribution of village chieftaincies suggests a division of Nanun into spheres of influence: villages of the *naakpamba* or elder-electors are situated in the east and south whereas the two Nmantambu houses have villages in the northwest (Gbugmayili) and southwest (Banyili). I can only offer an historical explanation for this fact: that the eastern part of Nanun was where more authochthonous elements of the population were dominant whereas the western part came under tighter control of the Nmantambu chiefly people.

Seniority plays a very important part in the competion for *naam*. It is usually applied in the selection of incumbents of *naams* which do not lead to Bimbilla. But it is also applied to competitive *naams* of the Nmantambu line. It seems that seniority was originally a more important factor than being chief of a 'gate' village. Of course, it is best for a candidate to be both the most senior in the line and to be incumbent to the most powerful 'gate' *naam*. In practice, this coincidence does not always occur. For example, my data show that there has been tough competition for succession since the turn of the century, which has invariably led to intervention by the colonial or post-colonial state power. It seems that seniority lost its status as paramount factor under the colonial administration, which favoured more flexible younger candidates for *naam*.

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I cannot go into the details about these succession cases here. It should be realised, however, that the competition for *naam* in every village of either the Gbugmayili or the Banyili 'gate' is ideally open to every *naabia* (member of the appropriate sub-line) and their number is far in excess of the number of vacant *naams*. The spirit of competition for *naam* is an integral part of Nanumba political culture. The numerous attempts of the German, British and Ghanaian administrations to straightjacket it with unqualified decisions or by codifying the 'rules of succession' could not suppress it. But by and large, the Nanumba Customary Regulations and Procedures of 1969 determine the primacy of *naam* in Nakpaa and Dakpam, which means that the incumbents of these 'gate' *naams* are more or less assured of succession to the Bimbilla *naam*, provided it is the turn of their house. It is totally impossible that a Gbugmayili Bimbilla Naa could be succeeded by another paramount from Gbugmayili. Alternation must be safeguarded, and the Nanumba are very keen on observing *kali* - 'the tradition'.[9]

The *naam* in Nanun functions on a daily basis as a system of courts - *naayili*. Every Nanumba village has a court headed by a chief (or other leader-like *lana*, or custodian). Non-Nanumba (especially Konkomba) settlements have headmen. The most important and also the largest court is at Bimbilla. The courts are composed of various elders (*nayilkpamba*, lit. elders of the chief's house). In Bimbilla these are led by the Worikpamo elder. The court elders are of various origin; some may even come from outside Nanun, like the late Yimahi Naa who comes from Dagbon. This, then, is another characteristic aspect of Nanumba political culture, that an important function may be performed by a person of foreign origin (at least if he comes from a ritually related polity).

The *nayilkpamba* have a strong influence on the chief because they reside in their vicinity and have regular access to them. The courts include Muslims and musicians (such as 'praise singers', *lunsi*, and 'violinists', *gonji*). The courts meet formally on Mondays and Fridays with more or less all members present (depending upon the importan-

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9. My research suggests, however, that if a particular element of custom or procedure is not repeated for any reason at an appropriate occasion, it tends to fall out of the customary cycle and a new procedure may emerge. So it was with the introduction of the *kpatihi* (skinmaker) or *gbonlana* (regent), both probably innovations of this century but now presented as age-old tra- ditions.

ce of the period). This is also when village chiefs come to greet the
Bimbilla Naa or other important chiefs. The court elders can meet at
any time at the request of the chief or if they themselves wish to
consult him. The case of the Bimbilla *nayilkpamba* is special because
the village chiefs see the paramount very rarely and only if they
travel to Bimbilla. They therefore have much less access to the
Bimbilla Naa than do the elders. It would be possible to speculate
about the competition between the elders and the chiefs for the
favors of the Bimbilla Naa. However, it seems that this does not
happen because the Nanumba political culture, like the estate system
in medieval Europe, has a strict division of competence.

The social mosaic which surrounds (and is part of) the *naam* is
completed by various professional groups (often of outside origin) and
stranger groups, for example, learned Muslims, weavers, butchers,
barbers, drummers. Each professional group and ethnic minority (the
Konkomba are in fact a numerical majority) has a chief (one per
group) and other title holders, who are usually enskinned by the
Bimbilla Naa. All such groups recognise the sovereignty of the
Bimbilla Naa. The resident Dagbamba enjoy, however, a special
position. Their *naam* does not differ much from that of the Nanumba,
they speak an almost identical language, and their paramountcy is
located in Yendi, a mere 70 kilometres from Nanun. Their loyalty to
their own chiefs is tolerated by the Nanumba: there is no Dagbamba
chief in Nanun who would be enskinned by the Bimbilla Naa.

The 'regulated anarchy' of the Konkomba

According to the results of Tait's anthropological research (1953,
1958, 1961) as reformulated by Sigrist (1967) and Skalník (1968), the
Konkomba were in the past divided into a number of 'subtribes'
distinguishing themselves by different dialects and facial marks (Tait
1958:168). Tait mentions that there were at least a dozen of these
'subtribes', but he did not meet a Konkomba who was able to name
more than six of them. He himself did not know the names of all of
the 'subtribes' (Tait 1953:220). It seems to me that the reason for
this is the changing character of the Konkomba as a composite ethnic
unit. That is, the 'subtribes' are not fixed; new ones emerge
according to the territorial expansion and fission of existing
'subtribes'. Today the Konkomba consider Kekpokpam, the area around
the Oti river - between 9 degrees and 10 degrees North, 0 degrees
and 1 degree East - as their homeland. In 1948 the census counted
59,640 Konkomba, while the 1960 census counted 110,000. In the mid-
1980s, with the Konkomba living in a number of regions of Ghana to

which they dispersed after the conflict with the Dagbamba in the late 1930s, it is very hard to estimate their number.

The Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA), in a memorandum on Konkomba Lands, refers to a report compiled by Cardinall in 1917, and maintains that the Konkomba had their own independent 'states'. These 'states' were Kumurjor, Bimba (Gbimba), Nayile, Kugnani, Gujoni (Kujoni), Lamo, Kanaafek, Chagbani and Kuncha:

> These have never been under any foreign domination as states by the British. Soon after the 1914-1918 war, the British aided the Dagombas to plant chiefs in some of the Konkomba Territory. An example of these were: Na-Yusufu at Zagbeli, Gbirmandan at Demon. (KOYA 1978)

The usage of 'state' here reflects the awakened ethnicity of the Konkomba, which seeks to support itself with a claim to the existence of Konkomba 'states', thereby emulating the European model of political organisation. The KOYA memorandum also uses the expressions Konkomba "chiefs and people" and the "Chiefs and the Tindanas[10] (landowners) of the Konkomba Traditional Area". This usage follows the common expression 'chiefs and people of the so-and-so traditional area', which Ghanaian politicians and the mass media normally use, reflecting the influence of the southern pattern (in southern Ghana there are no areas without chiefs).

In a 1981 Memorandum on the Nanumba-Konkomba conflict, signed by its then national president Mr. Kenneth Wujangi, the KOYA rejects the allegation that the Konkomba are fighting for their own 'chieftaincy'. "The KOYA would like to say that Konkombas do not attatch as much importance to Chieftaincy as other tribes. They have and respect compound and village heads." (KOYA 1981). This indicates a willingness on the part of the KOYA leaders to dissociate themselves from the recent general Konkomba fascination with chieftaincy. While the findings of ethnographers support the KOYA's claim that in the past there were no chiefs among the Konkomba, recent facts indicate that Konkomba preferences are not static and that the emancipation of the Konkomba reflects itself in a quest for recognition within the wider Ghanian society in which chieftaincy is an important cultural feature, in the North as well as in southern Ghana. Clearly defined leadership, exemplified by the existence of chiefs, is considered a key to the desired recognition. Interviews with

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10. I.e. the autochthonous earthpriests.

both Konkombas and Nanumbas support this viewpoint, as do documents from both ethnic communities. One could speculate that the KOYA leaders decided in 1981 not to push for Konkomba chiefs for tactical reasons because the Konkomba youth would then have to face competition from *ogbors* (chiefs). In the changed situation of 1986, however, the KOYA leaders openly asked the government for recognition of their need for chieftaincy (KOYA 1986).

David Tait (1958) described the situation as it prevailed some forty years ago when one could hardly talk about the unity of the Konkomba. 'Subtribes' had between two and six thousand members and were composed of clans and lineages. Clans were combined in three ways into 'subtribes': a) those with known ancestors, usually in a moiety or dual fashion; b) those with unknown ancestors, usually more than two clans in a 'subtribe'; c) exogamous 'contrapuntal' clans of different origin. All clans had their elders (*onikpel*) but 'contrapuntal' clans had both elders and earthpriests (*otindaa*, an equivalent of *tindana* among the Mole-Dagbane speakers). According to Tait, clans also constituted residential communities ('districts' in Tait's terminology) and were the largest political units. Within 'subtribes' clans and districts (i.e. communities based on clan membership) were units of both ritual and social control: "ritual unity and legal unity ... go pari passu" (Tait 1958:185-186). Lineage fission within the clans was continuous and resulted from population increase and land exhaustion. The resulting new units exhibited settlement patterns which, unlike the Nanumba, rarely entailed the formation of villages.

As among the Nanumba, seniority was the most important Konkomba political principle. Elders (*onikpel*) represented clans and lineages but there were no single leaders of the 'subtribes'. Konkomba elders had no power to impose decisions within the community. They used their moral position in the community to influence the outcome of important issues. There was no legitimate use of force within the community. In cases of violence, such as homicide, the guilty person was ostracised (Tait 1958:188-189; 1960; 1953:274-276).

Fighting which involved bloodshed was highly valued. However, the considerable authority of elders ensured that within the boundaries of one Konkomba 'subtribe' the relations between clans and communities were more peaceful than violent. The clans of a 'subtribe' "bury the fight": only members of different 'subtribes' fought with the support of their clansmen and co-subtribesmen. In contrast, between 'subtribes' endless feuding reigned, restrained in part by the relationship of *nabo* between men whose mothers came from the same

clan. Because women may marry anywhere this relationship is very widespread. Subtribes did not help each other in fighting an outside - non-Konkomba - enemy. For example, fighting between one Konkomba 'subtribe' and a Basare group would not involve other Konkomba 'subtribes'.

As we will see below, Tait's findings are being superseded by new developments which are reducing the importance of the division into 'subtribes'. The mutual help of the Konkomba from various 'subtribes' in the conflict with the Nanumba, and especially in the open hostilities, are a clear indication of the intensive social change which has occurred since Tait carried out research in the 1950s. The tendency of elders to act as chiefs, i.e. to have a more formalised and powerful leadership role over larger units of the Konkomba population, irrespective of 'subtribe' membership, is another sort of change which emerges in connection with the Nanumba-Konkomba 'war' of 1981 (for more detail on the Nanumba-Konkomba conflict see Skalník 1986a and 1986b).

Early responses of the Nanumba *naam* to colonial power

The profound difference between the Nanumba and the European concepts of political authority is nicely illustrated by the Nanumba response to European conquest. From the moment of first contact in the late 1800s, the result of colonisation was encapsulation rather than destruction or assimilation of the indigenous polity of Nanun. When the Germans wanted easy access to Sansanné Mango, their northernmost outpost in Togo, the way led via Bimbilla and Yendi, the capitals of the two hitherto independent polities of Nanun and Dagbon. In 1895, the leader of a small German paramilitary party, Dr. Gruner, is said to have been called a 'red monkey' by the inhabitants of the Dagbani village of Gbungbaliga. The German government of Togo used this as a pretext to send an expedition against Yendi at the end of November, 1896 (cf. Trierenberg 1914).

The Nanumba, who had a ritual pact of common origin with the Dagbamba, decided to stand against the German force. To allow the Germans to pass through Nunun on their way to attack Dagbon would have been considered inconsistent with the special relationship between the two polities. The German contingent was 200 man strong but included only four German soldiers, the rest being southern Togolese soldiers and porters. The Nanumba force included cavalrymen, musketeers and other warriors, totalling perhaps several thousand or more. The division of the Nanumba polity into estates

did not allow all Nanumba to fight the invaders, for only the warriors could engage in fighting.

The division of labor between the three most important Nanumba chieftaincies was respected as well. Naa Abalsi from the Banyili house, who was then the Bimbilla Naa, decided to vacate Bimbilla. His warriors from Jilo and other adjacent warrior villages were hidden. When the Germans entered Bimbilla and found it abandoned, they decided to occupy the palace of Naa Abalsi. The high roof of the main hall was used as a lookout post from which the whole area could be viewed. The German commander von Massow thus already had a military advantage, but the main advantage fell into his lap in the form of the Nanumba style of fighting. The Nanumba forces did not unite. Instead the forces of the Bimbilla Naa, Dakpam Naa and Nakpaa Naa fought separately during different parts of the day. The German unit was able to withstand the separate attacks and inflict very serious casualties on each attacking group (cf. Trierenberg 1914).

This case testifies to the fact that the Nanumba had only a very loose kind of polity, one in which the Bimbilla Naa was not even in a position to act adequately in his own defence. The pretenders to the Bimbilla naam decided for themselves how to face an invader. The invader, on the other hand, represented a highly centralised military power which, though numerically weak, was far more efficient thanks to modern weapons and military art. Against the German-led unity of purpose stood the Nanumba with three important village chiefs, each with his own warriors. They had never fought together before and they united only very reluctantly for the defence of Nanun. Two incommensurable systems stood against each other: a highly organised state versus a loosely-knit system of authority based on the sanctity of tradition rather than the willpower of individuals.

Loyalty to the Bimbilla Naa was in general poorly defined. Settlements on the outskirts of Nanumba were sometimes at a loss as to whom they should show their allegiance and sometimes changed loyalties. Thus the village of Tagnamo passed from Nanun to Dagbon in the 1920s. The village of Yeji wanted to show loyalty to Gonja but was prevented from doing so by the Nanumba chiefs. The means of coercion at the disposal of the Nanumba chiefs were, however, not very strong. The chiefs were farmers like the other villagers; access to the chiefs was open to all villagers during the day. There were some customary obligations, like working on the chief's farm or building the palace for a new chief, but these were enforced without physical coercion. Tradition was the only coercive force, if we can speak of coercion at all.

Naa Abalsi was not deposed from his position as Bimbilla Naa and
Nanun was not effectively occupied until about 1900. The Germans,
however, misinterpreted the nature of *naam* and the Nanumba
political culture. They gave orders through the chiefs, especially
through the Bimbilla Naa, without realising that the Nanumba chiefs
had no real means of enforcing their orders. The Germans had
ultimately to use threats of physical force to ensure that roads were
built and their loads moved along them.[11] When in 1909 a subsequent
paramount chief, Bimbilla Naa Salifu (also from the Banyili chiefly
house), defied what he considered unreasonable orders from the
Germans (who by then required a vast amount of forced labor for
porterage, public works and cotton farms near Krachi), he was
arrested, taken to Krachi and 'deskinned'. Later he was banished to
the village of Nasamba, a few miles to the south of Bimbilla. The
Nanumba were adamant that they could not install another chief (as
the Germans wanted) because the banished Bimbilla Naa was still
alive. They solved the problem by making a very young man from the
same chiefly house his provisional successor. When this Naa Mahimi
suddenly died, the electors decided that it was now time to enskin
someone from Gbugmayili - the other chiefly house. So Naa Harruna
became the incumbent of the Bimbilla *naam*. The British took over
the western part of German Togo after the First World War, and
when Naa Harruna died in 1917, Naa Salifu was restored to the *naam*,
which he retained until his death in 1929.

For the Nanumba *naam* is the essential element of tradition - *kali*. It
is important to achieve it, but not in order to be able to force
others to do things. The European concept of power is less symbolic:
the use of political power is thought to be capable of effecting
economic, political or social change. For the Nanumba the *naam* is an
end in itself and is identical with tradition and continuity. For the
sake of continuity people who recognise *naam* as their highest value
learned how to face the European system and how to function
within it both economically and politically. The highest value of the
Nanumba remains the *naam*, which is the most precious part of their
own identity. It is the symbol, the meaning of existence of Nanumba
society.

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11. This forceful approach of the Germans accounts for the present
Nanumba expression 'German work', as opposed to 'British work'
which is leisurely.

Is Nanun a 'state'? Are the Konkomba 'acephalous'?

My central contention in this article is that Nanumba chieftaincy
(*naam*) is complementary to the 'regulated anarchy' of the Konkomba.
This thesis sounds unusual because most anthropologists, historians,
development sociologists and administrators, as well as the Nanumba
and the Konkomba themselves, believe in the opposition of these
principles of indigenous politics.

Is it useful to oppose 'stateless' and 'state' societies ? In more
concrete terms: Is the difference in political culture of the Nanumba
and the Konkomba so enormous that this very contrast contributed to
the armed conflict in 1981 between these two ethnic groups? I do not
think so. The elements of centralisation and decentralisation, the
elements of the use of violence and the banning of violence, are
present in both societies. Both the Konkomba ('acephalous') and the
Nanumba ('state') were able to unite in a war effort against each
other. The centralisation of the Nanumba even proved to be a
disadvantage and they lost the 1981 'war' (cf. Skalník 1986a, 1986b).
The real problem is the relationship between the European state and
these African forms of political organisation. The European model
tends to classify according to its own criteria and then to manipulate
the consciousness of the people thus classified so that they behave
according to the typology.

If one looks at the objective differences between the two, one finds
fewer 'structural' differences than anthropologists of the British
structural-functionalist tradition often maintain (cf. Fortes 1940;
Drucker-Brown 1975; Goody 1971). The 'segmentary' system has
existed for centuries in Dagbon alongside chieftaincy, making up a
clearly complementary unity. Especially in the area around Gushiego,
to the north of the capital of Yendi, there has developed a symbiosis
of the Konkomba with the Dagbamba, a process which had already
started in pre-colonial times. In that area of Nanun where Konkomba
settlement has the longest history (northeastern Nanun), the
Konkomba are firmly incorporated into the Nanumba system of
chieftaincy, having their own chief - the Kanjo Naa - and a number
of mostly military dignitaries at the courts of the Nanumba *naanima*.
The boundaries of the two systems are not easily discernible. Rather
than opposing 'ideal types', it would be better to speak of one system
with two or more poles. It is also wrong to speak of the incom-
patibility of the two social systems. It was the colonial and post-
colonial state which triggered off the formation of political ethnicity
and the polarisation of the two political cultures. The differences in
language and custom which this process of ethnification emphasised

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came increasingly to be jealously guarded by both 'ethnic' groups, and this in turn contributed to the increasing intransigence between them.

On the other hand, it is true that the Nanumba as well as the Dagbamba looked with condescension on the Konkomba. The differences were significant enough not to allow a complete merger between the Dagbamba and the Konkomba. Unlike other autochthonous groups which have let themselves be assimilated since the times of Nmantambu's migration and his politico-ritual conquest (for instance, the Nawuri in Nanun), the Konkomba in most cases successfully resisted attempts at assimilation. Nevertheless, they do seem to have internalised some Nanumba values since, following their victory over the Nanumba in 1981, they installed their own chiefs in Nanun.

At least in Northern Ghana, most areas have historically known a mixed situation in which the principles of centralisation and decentralisation, power and 'anarchy' are blurred. Boundaries between these principles did not really exist because there were no bounded political systems. The transition from one 'centralised' polity to another, from Nanun to Dagbon but also from Nanun to Gonja, was gradual because the distance from centers of chieftaincy allowed for flexibility. Drawing exact political boundaries is a European obsession of the last few hundred years, quickly internalised by modern African states. The Nanumba and Konkomba have also internalised this politicised ethnicity and claim authority over the same territory by emphasising not their similarities, but rather their differences.

Nanun was certainly never a 'state' if we consider its machinery for exercising power over people and territory, nor were the Konkomba 'headless', with no leadership and no possibility that leadership would emerge within 'traditional' society. The concept of the 'state' (with 'traditional', 'primitive', 'early' or similar qualifying adjectives) is simply inapplicable to the study of politics in such societies. The example of the Nanumba and Konkomba, two ethnic groups whose political systems have been described as in opposition by anthropologists, shows that the differences between them are of secondary importance if either of them is compared with the state systems in Europe on the basis of which the concept and theory of 'the state' have been developed during the last few hundred years. Future research and theory in political anthropology will not be successful unless the typological exercise is abandoned and analyses of concrete indigenous polities are undertaken with theoretical and methodological tools appropriate to the object of study.

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