A Working Class in Formation ? Economic Crisis and Strategies of Survival among Dagara Mine Workers in Ghana
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Résumé
Ce travail examine les réactions des travailleurs migrants dagara à la crise économique et sociale qui frappe l'industrie des mines d'or du Ghana. Au lieu qu'émerge une classe de mineurs de la deuxième ou troisième génération, stable, urbanisée, autonome et dotée d'une solide conscience de classe, on constate que les stratégies de survie des mineurs dagara incluent, en plus du travail salarié, la mobilisation de toute une série de ressources économiques, sociales et culturelles : diversification des sources de revenus ; redéploiement géographique des activités économiques au sein de la famille étendue et maintien de liens étroits avec la région d'origine ; adhésion à des organisations ethniques. Les auteurs abordent également le rôle de la chefferie et de l'ethnicité dans les mines qui, loin d'être de purs instruments au service de la domination du capital, sont une composante essentielle des stratégies de survie des mineurs.

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Forced labour, rotatory labour migration, and the coexistence of wage labour with rural subsistence production have been the prevailing reality of labour in Africa up until at least World War II. Expanding manufacturing industries after the war and during the immediate post independence era greatly enhanced the role of an urbanized wage labour force. At the same time, urban labour markets were increasingly split up into two sectors, one consisting of the relatively minute core groups of unionized labourers in full wage employment, the other, so called 'informal sector', attracting ever swelling numbers of chronically underemployed and underpaid workers in small firms and the self-employed. It is predominantly within this sector of the urban economy that labour migration continues to play an important role.

The dynamics of African labour history is reflected in the major themes and controversies of African labour studies since the 1940s. The continued relevance, for instance, of the rural economy to the majority of migrants to the industrial centers forms the backdrop to the debate centered around the work of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute on de- and retribalization in Central and Southern Africa during the 1940s and 1950s. Industrial growth and the increasing stabilization of labour together with the strengthening of labour unions and the upsurge of nationalist ideology during the 1960s shifted attention from migration.

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and cultural heterogeneity to the role of workers' organizations in national politics and national development.

Growing conflicts between unions and nationalist governments, the subsequent defeat and failure of the unions, and frequently the absence of a socialist perspective among the workers disillusioned leftist researchers about the role of the proletariat as revolutionary vanguard. Thus the 1970s saw an orientation more towards historical perspectives on what de facto constituted the African labour force, its internal composition, its link with the workplace, and its hidden forms of resistance. In this perspective, the African working class as a fully proletarianized, permanently urbanized and culturally homogeneous entity is certainly a minority that must be looked at in its manifold links with non-industrial labour. Nevertheless, hidden in much of the more recent work on African labour by historians and sociologists is the assumption that the obstacles and detours of history are only a transitory moment in an inexorable process of the formation of an African working class. Not surprisingly, many studies have focused on those aspects of African labour such as miners, dock and railway workers as well as the special issues of labour in South Africa that best seem to illustrate such a concept of an African working class.

One of the West African examples for this 'workerist' tendency is Jeff Crisp's *The Story of an African Working Class* (1984). Crisp's research was conducted during 1977-78 when relative prosperity fuelled hopes that ethnic and regional allegiances would soon be a thing of the past and that union militancy and radical worker action would ultimately lead to progressive political change. Crisp argues that the history of

2. The fact that proletarianization and capitalist development are not the dominant reality in Africa has of course been crucial in another debate on the articulation of modes of production (Meillassoux 1975). The focus of this approach, however, seems to be somewhat different from studies of industrial labour in that the functionality of non-capitalist forms of production to capitalist accumulation is emphasized.

3. For a résumé of the literature on labour and labour migration in Africa, see Freund 1988 and Stichter 1985.

4. Crisp 1984: 187. While Piet Könings' report (1980) on his research among the workers of Ashanti Goldfields shares much of Crisp's perspective, a somewhat more pessimistic stance is taken in a study by Jim Silver (1978). Like Crisp, Silver found that mine workers in spite of being radically opposed to mining capital, the State, and a distant union bureaucracy, only developed narrow, workplace related interests devoid of a socialist perspective. As a result of growing unprofitability of the enterprises, workers' resistance concentrated more on pragmatic forms such as gold theft, boycott and go slow which in turn frustrated capital's attempts at raising productivity through tighter control mechanisms and greater discipline. In short, the entire industry seemed to be characterized by a stalemate.

An unpublished manuscript by Don Robotham, based on fieldwork conducted in 1971 seems to be going one step further. The author suggests that it was the failure to decolonize the mines and the growth of post-colonial corruption, favoritism and ethnic discrimination, rather than the opposition to
Ghana gold miners illustrates the evolution of a class from within the ranks of coerced and rotatory labour migrants until the 1930s towards an increasingly stable, urbanized and detribalized mine proletariat. At the end of the 1970s this proletariat has become a 'self-reproducing sector of the Ghanaian working class, separated from their rural origins and fully committed to wage-earning employment' (Crisp 1984:182). Ethnicity or regional origin have 'never been an issue of overt conflict between the workers' (ibid.), strong occupational solidarity that was forged by the shared experience of dangerous underground work having characterized mine workers' struggles. On the other hand, miners in Ghana have fallen victim to false consciousness in that they never attempted to link their struggles with other sectors of Ghana's labouring population and 'have never espoused any radical political ideology' (ibid.: 184).

In the present paper we propose a somewhat different approach. On the basis of fieldwork conducted among Dagara workers from the Upper West Region in Ghana in the gold mining centers of Tarkwa and Obuasi from August to September 1988, we argue that Dagara miners' struggles for survival and better living conditions did not mean the complete assimilation to a 'Southern' way of life and an irreversible severance of ties with the home area. Of course this hypothesis has to be seen in the light of the fact that, although by 1988 the worst slump of the late 1970s and early 1980s seemed to be over, many of its after effects were still being felt in numerous spheres of workers' lives. As a result of the continued effects of the crisis miners seem to be further removed as ever from being fully committed to wage earning as the sole form of their reproduction. Rather workers' strategies of survival involved the mobilization of a wide range of economic, social and cultural resources beyond a wage income and a 'proletarian' way of life.

capitalist exploitation as such, that motivated miners' militancy. Much of Robotham's evidence seems to support our own findings, but a closer examination of his argument will have to await the publication of his paper.

Names of social and linguistic units in Dagaraland are objects of ideological controversies. The colonial administration introduced the term 'Dagarti' and many Ghanaians continued to use this label which most Dagara reject as pejorative. There is agreement, however, that Dagara is the language spoken by a cluster of groups inhabiting an area roughly extending from Wa to the southernmost parts of Burkina Faso and into the border regions of Ghana and Ivory Coast in the east. But there seems to be a debate on Dagaaba and Dagara as ethnic terms. Some believe that those living around Wa, Nandoli and Kaleo form a distinct group called Dagaaba (sing. Dago) and that the term Dagara should be reserved for the people living around Lawra and Nandom. Others hold that Dagara is the only correct term for all Dagara-speaking people. See Goody (1956: 16-26), and Der (1989) for more details on the controversies.

The fact that the combination of different sources of income that crosscut different sectors of the economy constitutes a central strategy to maximize security is underlined by several studies that emerged from the 'Bielefeld' approach such as Elwert, Evers & Wilkens (1983) and the articles in
Most prominent among these resources are the maintenance of strong economic and social links with workers’ home areas. As a defence against fluctuating wage levels and insecure job opportunities, miners have also created highly diversified networks of income generating activities as well as multiple overlapping systems of social organization. Although there is no automatic link between non-wage forms of income and home ties, the position of Dagara miners as an immigrant minority group discriminated against by Southerners restricts the opportunities of gaining a foothold in the local non-mining economy. Hence, the necessity for non-wage earning activities reinforces home ties and ethnically exclusive forms of social organization.

From the vantage point of our observations during a time of recession it may also become necessary to re-evaluate mine workers’ past strategies and to redress some of Crisp’s findings for earlier periods. Most probably the relevance of resources other than wage labour and unions for miners’ survival is not merely a result of the present crisis alone. Resources such as ethnic or regional ties are likely to have been used by Dagara and other miners from the North also in periods of relative prosperity. It appears that even during those periods, wage levels were never sufficiently high to allow for permanent settlements of miners’ entire families in the South and that alternative forms of economic activity were limited.

There are two reasons for the focus on Dagara migrants. First, Dagara have been among the earliest migrant labourers from Northern Ghana on the goldfields and for some decades formed one of the strongest ethnic groups within the underground workforce. Second, the investigation in Tarkwa and Obuasi was designed as part of a larger research project that Carola Lentz is carrying out on migration, home ties and ethnicity among the Dagara.

Fieldwork involved both workplace observation underground, the examination of archival material and numerous interviews with key informants. The principal material, however, consists of the life stories and genealogies of some twenty migrants. The focus on life stories as primary source material implied a strong bias in favour of an actor oriented approach and of an evaluation of the role of wage labour,

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7. A recent study by Helmut Blumbach (1985: 219) on working-class culture and union organization among railway workers in Sekondi-Takoradi, concludes that even among Ghanaian railway men, one of the prime examples of a fully urbanized, class conscious African proletariat (see Jeffries 1978), from the 1960s, collective action in class terms was increasingly becoming dysfunctional in a situation when survival depended on individual skills, luck and connections to the black market.
migration and home ties as part of the life projects of individuals. The use of the biographical method clearly results from the hypothesis that migrants’ decisions to maintain strong rural links and to engage in numerous economic activities are more than merely a reactive response to intractable social forces and ‘objective’ processes. It highlights the role of individuals as instruments and subjects of the history of gold mining.

At the same time, an understanding of the careers of individual miners required an examination of the nuclear and extended families as well as of the ethnic communities in which they lived. Much of this research, particularly with respect to the rural base in the North, remains to be undertaken. This was, however, but one of the limitations of the present field project. The exclusive focus on those migrants who readily identified themselves as Dagara precluded access to those individuals who, if they exist at all, deny their Dagara origins. Furthermore, the short time spent in Tarkwa and Obuasi in combination with the methodological emphasis on life stories yielded a number of interesting, but somewhat unconnected and at times contradicting statements and documents whose linkages are not always clear. Moreover, lack of time did not allow for the confrontation of self-portrayal with informants’ lived reality. Thus what is attempted here amounts to little more than a re-interpretation of migrancy and ethnicity in Ghana through the presentation of individual experiences.

The Insecurity Mine Workers Face: Past and Present

The conditions created by mining capital and the State, and the social forces that confront the miners in their daily lives, form the backdrop of the hypothesis that the reliance on wage labour as only source of income is unattractive for Dagara migrants. Evidently, conditions in Tarkwa and Obuasi in themselves do not sufficiently explain the persistence of home ties among Dagara migrants. An improved infrastructure in the Upper West, recent attempts to make the region economically more attractive, and, last but not least, strong emotional, cultural and religious roots in Dagaraland that bind the miners to their villages, have also to be taken into account and will remain an important topic for further investigation. But independent of these factors, a closer look at the history of gold mining in Southern Ghana reveals that the development of the gold industry was marked by the rapid succession of expansion and recessions that led to considerable fluctuations in the size of the workforce and of wage levels. Thus, in the ‘world that the mine owners made’, insecurity more often than not has been an everyday reality for miners.

Pre-industrial gold mining in Ghana has been documented from
the 15th century, but its roots reach back well into the 10th century. With the advent of foreign capital and industrial mining technology in the 1880s, however, small independent gold winners were ousted. After 1900 the industry experienced its first boom as a result of the closure of the South African mines during the Boer War and in the wake of the ‘pacification’ of Ashanti: annual average production rose from roughly 25,000 oz. during the last quarter of the 19th century to approximately 150,000 oz. in the first decade of the 20th century (Anin 1987: 20). Only some forty mines survived the ensuing slump with enough capital to buy the machinery required for deep level mining. Labourers were mainly drawn from local, previously independent gold winners, Kru from Liberia and Yoruba from Nigeria whose high degree of mobility and refusal to accept long term contracts secured them high wages. Where the gold boom in the first decade of the 20th century increased the number of mine workers to roughly 19,000 in 1910, World War I and particularly the depression period of the late 1920s reduced it to a mere 7,165 in 1931. In 1931 Great Britain departed from the Gold Standard and with a drastic increase of 70% in the price of gold, the industry experienced a spectacular revival. The number of workers in Ghana’s gold industry rose to almost 40,000 towards the end of the decade (Robotham 1989: 12-14, Crisp 1984: 42, 57).

Much of this labour, particularly underground labour, was drawn from migrants from the French territories to the north of Ghana and the Northern Territories that had been ‘pacified’ and thus opened up as a labour reservoir since 1906. In the following three decades the percentage of Northern labourers rose steadily, amounting to 37% of the workforce in 1924 and 55% in 1934. There are several reasons that account for this increase. From 1921 to 1925, the mines had been using forced labour recruits from the Northern Territories. Although the scheme proved ineffective and large numbers of recruits deserted, it probably established migratory routes for later generations of migrants. In addition, improved infrastructural facilities made migration more attractive. As for the labourers from the French territories, migration was a response to colonial taxation. The fact that these growing numbers of migrants were flocking to the mines, a previously relatively unattractive employer, was due to the decline of alternative wage opportunities, in particular the decrease of cocoa production. Within this wave of labour from the North, Dagara workers came to constitute an increasingly larger percentage. It rose from 3% in 1924 to 10%.

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8. This and the following paragraphs are based on figures in Crisp 1984, Anin 1987, Robotham 1989, Thomas 1973 and Mensah 1977. There exist, however, certain differences among these authors about the number of labourers and even gold output in the industry. These do not, however, seem to affect our argument.
in 1934 and, in some mines, even reached more than 25% of the work force during the 1950s and 1960s (Robotham 1989: 17,36-38,53). Nevertheless, throughout this period, migratory cycles must have remained fairly short, for the annual turnover of labour in the gold mines amounted to as much as 80% of the work force, with this figure being lower in the skilled strata.

The Second World War drastically reduced mining operations. Most mines were put on a mere care and maintenance basis at least between 1943 and 1945 so that by 1944-1945 the number of employees stood at only 24,000. Because of difficulties in obtaining mine supplies after the war the size of the labour force further decreased to about 20,000 in 1955. This total remained fairly constant ever since, although specific enterprises like Ashanti Goldfields have enlarged their number of employees. In many cases, the overall downswing had a dramatic local impact. When four mines in the Tarkwa area closed down, for instance, between 1955 and 1960, more than 4,000 miners lost their jobs without other mines being able to absorb this large group of unemployed. Today the total workforce of Ghana's remaining gold mines is about 18,800, thus equalling the level of the early 1920s, and since 1986 the recruitment of new labourers has practically ceased. Prospects of a considerable expansion of the workforce are doubtful.

In consequence, planning a career in the mines, characterized as they are by periodic setbacks in employment, has never been and still is not the most secure way of making a living. Of course the above figures do by no means prevent some miners, despite all slumps, from staying in the mines for twenty or more years. But what is argued here is that the general picture of insecure employment opportunities in the mines does not favour the emergence of a stable, urbanized, and self-reproducing class of second or third generation miners.9

It is not only the problem of job insecurity that makes full dependence on wage labour a risky option, but also highly oscillating wage levels and unsteady food supplies. Despite a crying need for long-term analyses of real income in Ghana, and in the mines in particular, the following broad trends can be discerned. Until World War I attempts to reduce the relatively high wages were hampered by the scarcity of labour, but when the cocoa industry, the main competitor of the mines, entered a

9. This does not necessarily prevent the emergence of a proletarianized and urbanized group, because unemployed miners may search for alternatives in other wage sectors. In order to make a strong case for a general tendency against proletarianization, one would of course have to analyze the overall development of wage labour opportunities. Although the relevant data are lacking, figures in the 1984 census do not support the assumption of a general trend towards proletarianization: only 31.3% of Ghanaians figure as 'urban population' and only 9% of the working population are employed in the manufacturing sector and a trifle 0.4% are in gold mining.
period of depression in the 1920s and 1930s, wages were successfully cut to a little more than half of the previous level. A number of strikes during the 1930s and 1940s brought substantial wage increases, but because of rising costs of living, miners' real income was at best maintained. The same applies to the 1960s, and there appear to have been only two short periods in which real earnings increased significantly: at the beginning of the 1950s new bonus schemes made for an almost 60% increase in the income of the majority of underground workers, and from 1972 to 1976 the Acheampong regime handed out a total of 200%, politically motivated wage increases (Crisp 1984: 27-28, 50, 61-62, 109, 170). By the end of the 1970s inflation had annihilated all earlier achievements and in 1983, eventually, the minimal wage index was at 13.1 compared to 100 in 1975, slowly recovering to 29.3 in 1986 (Siebold 1988).

The fact that monetary income alone was never a guarantee for survival is most graphically illustrated by long-standing and perennial conflicts over soaring food prices and periodic bottlenecks in food supplies. Management and the miners have always been forced to seek alternative arrangements—albeit for different motives. On the one hand, the industry considered it necessary to provide for cheap or free food and in doing so pursued policies of social control. On the other hand, mine workers frequently and with the consent of management engaged in autonomous food production. Similarly, housing has been an issue of conflict and a constant factor of instability in miners' lives from the very beginnings of the industry. Although the mines have provided for free housing in varying degrees, there has always been a chronic shortage of accommodation in company compounds. Furthermore, the allocation of space is dependent on length of service or rank and the rooms have to be vacated upon termination of the contract. Private accommodation in town is even more scarce and extremely expensive.

What further increases the insecurity for Northern migrants, however, is a major dividing line that separates Northerners from Southerners at the workplace and in public life. As a result of the historical peculiarities of the recruitment of labour for the mines, most Northerners remained confined to underground labour with limited possibilities of promotion. Only rarely did they have access to surface jobs, administrative or skilled manual, that were largely reserved for Southerners. Clearly, the combination of these conditions made and continues to make permanent urban residence and commitment to wage labour a remote possibility for the majority of migrants from the North.
The Setting: Ashanti Goldfields Corporation and Tarkwa Goldfields Ltd.

Tarkwa and Obuasi are two of the largest gold mining centers in Ghana. Obuasi is dominated by Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC), owned by the Ghanaian government (55%) and Lonrho (45%). AGC has almost 12,000 employees and counts among Africa's most profitable gold mines. By contrast, Tarkwa Goldfields Limited is entirely State owned, employs only some 2,500 people and has been in crisis for many years. While AGC is now rapidly recovering from the crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tarkwa Goldfields—much like the other State owned mines—is barely capable of footing its wage bill without frequent government loans. The differences in rentability and profits between AGC and the rest of Ghana's gold mines are in part due to different geological conditions and in part to different long-term investment policies. During the 1950s and 1960s, AGC was able to increase its production, whereas in the other mines it fell sharply. By 1961, the newly founded State Gold Mining Corporation (SGMC) with its subsidiaries such as Tarkwa Goldfields had become unable to overcome its unrentability and since developed into a regular recipient of annual government grants. Furthermore, during the 1970s Tarkwa Goldfields had exhausted most of its high grade ore reserves without having further invested into shafts and exploration. At the same time, the mine spent a major portion of its revenues on welfare schemes. As a result, it was AGC whose output eventually accounted for roughly two thirds of Ghana's total gold production during the 1970s, a proportion which is presently reaching 80%.

In 1983 the Rawlings government sought International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank support for Ghana's ailing gold industry and when a $30 million loan was granted to SGMC, IMF advisors insisted on major improvements in the areas of management efficiency and manpower organization. An expatriate management from a Canadian mining consortium took over in 1984, and apart from acquiring new basic plant and equipment material, implemented a rigorous retrenchment program. Production has since doubled from its 1985 level and projections estimate that it could be increased by a further 100% within the next few years.

AGC, for its part, invested a $55 million loan from the International Finance Corporation into a substantial expansion of its operations, a 50% increase of the gold production being projected for the 1990s. Junior staff was reduced by some 15%, but the company also embarked on a massive housing scheme for 650 staff and their families.

10. This and the following paragraphs are based on figures in Anin (1987: 24-45), and on the Annual Reports and Statements of Accounts of Ashanti Goldfields Corporation Limited, from 1963 to 1987.
But nothing perhaps illustrates the differences in rentability between AGC and Tarkwa Goldfields better than the fact that for the first time in the history of the Ghanaian Mine Workers Union different agreements have been signed for both mines since 1987-1988. Whereas Tarkwa Goldfields and the rest of the SGMC mines merely joined the nationwide 25% wage increase, AGC granted a 38% increase in 1988.

Clearly, jobs are more attractive for miners in Obuasi than in Tarkwa, a fact which is reflected in the exodus of many Dagara migrants from Tarkwa, but not from Obuasi. Nevertheless, a general sense of insecurity prevails in Dagara miners’ discourse about work and life both in Obuasi and Tarkwa. The ways in which the fluctuations of the mine owner’s world shaped the eventful careers of these miners will become particularly clear in the life stories of two Dagara foremen whom we met in 1988.

Mine Workers’ Strategies of Survival: Two Life Stories

Walter Y., or ‘Waterproof’, as he is popularly known in the Dagara community of Obuasi, is a foreman in his late forties. We met him in his house at Wawasi, one of the housing schemes which Ashanti Goldfields Corporation had built for the upper echelons of the underground workers. Walter comes from Lawra Zanbug. His father was a farmer there who had also gained some experience as a seasonal farm labourer in ‘Kumasi’, as the Dagara generally refer to Southern Ghana. Initially, Walter helped on his father’s farm, but by the time he was twenty, in the late 1950s, he considered himself to be old enough to travel south to ‘get money, to go home and marry’. He continued: ‘If I still had money I would build a house and even buy a cow’. And so he decided to leave with his older brother for Techiman and Kumasi. But both places offered little security, Kumasi being in the midst of political unrest. Luckily, a co-villager in Nkawkaw, further south, soon provided shelter and, more importantly, brought the two brothers in touch with farmers who were in need of labourers. After three months of farm work, Walter returned to Lawra, the proud owner of two pairs of shorts, a cover cloth, two shirts, and one pound. As was customary, his senior brother had received both his own and Walter’s payment of which he retained a symbolic portion for himself. On returning to Lawra, the same kind of ritual exchange was repeated by Walter’s father who also kept a small portion for himself, for ‘when you come down South and you come home you show the things that you have bought to your father’.

11. This and the following quotations are taken from an interview with Walter Y. in Obuasi, 13 Sept. 1988.
Ghana.
The farming season completed, Walter again went South, this time to stay in Fomisu for a year to do farm labour. Fomisu was close to Obuasi and must have provided ample opportunities to study the living conditions in the town and, more significantly, to persuade Walter of the much higher wage levels in the gold mines—sixty pence per day for a shovelboy, enough to 'get everything that we needed'. So Walter decided to 'queue at the Labour Office'\textsuperscript{12}, until he found himself employed as a shovelboy, then as a spannerboy and machine driver and finally as a headman. Walter's employment at AGC between 1961 and 1965 enabled him to accumulate the considerable sum of C 14,000\textsuperscript{13} that would have allowed him to realize his dreams of a house, cows and even to set up a business. But alas, on the trip home Walter's entire savings were stolen and the unfortunate 'Waterproof' had no option but to return to the South. This time it took him to Tarkwa, where he not only advanced to the level of blastman until 1970, but again saved up enough money to return home to marry. But disaster struck again: Walter overstayed his leave of 30 days and only left for Tarkwa with his new wife after seven months. He was promptly dismissed and returned to AGC at Obuasi where he has been working ever since.

In many ways, Walter Y. must be considered a successful migrant who despite his numerous setbacks, has succeeded in turning most of his dreams into reality. He married and has five children, and he built a house in his native village. But Walter also has to make provisions for an increasingly unstable future, because 'the money has been increased very high and yet we are suffering' and because people 'are just running after money and we don't care a bit about our fellow human beings'. Thus he is not only continuously enlarging his livestock in the North, he also hired a farm outside Obuasi that yields enough corn to keep the family going for a year depending on the number of visitors. After completing 20 years of service in 1990, Walter will be able to make maximum use of the bonus schemes and plans to return home. As the head of the household, he has to look after his widowed mother and thus he would like to take out his life pension in one sum and to buy a lorry.

The quest for a secure place in life also informed the career of another foreman at AGC, Naamwin-ire D. Now in his early fifties, Naamwin-ire was born in Puffien near Nandom. Like Walter's parents, his parents were illiterate farmers and so Naamwin-ire worked on his father's farm

\textsuperscript{12} With very few exceptions, the interviews with Dagaa migrants have been conducted in their own language. English terms used by our interviewees are italicized.

\textsuperscript{13} C = new cedi; in 1988, C 250 were approximately equivalent to US $ 1.60.
before he eventually got married at a relatively young age. Although his father had never been joining the ranks of Dagara migrants that left their homes to work in the South, the kind of tales that returning migrants were telling about ‘the good things that were down South’, must have fired Naamwin-ire’s imagination. Particularly the fact that ‘there was farmwork as well as white man’s work down South’ that would yield enough money to build a homestead and to buy some animals made the young farmer decide to leave for Ejisu near Kumasi to work ‘by day’ as a farm labourer in 1953. After a short stay, Naamwin-ire returned to his father’s farm, only to hire himself out again as farm labourer in Fosu near Obuasi a few months later. This sort of short-term migration during the dry season was quite typical for many young Dagara men and frequently led to a longer spell of employment in the mines. Thus some time in the second half of the 1950s, after eight months of waiting during which he lived at his senior brother’s room, Naamwin-ire eventually found employment as a shovelboy in Tarkwa. Although mine work turned out to be no more remunerative for Naamwin-ire than his previous work as farm labourer, he preferred work at Tarkwa, because it was ‘good to be with other Dagara at the same place’. In the Tarkwa mine Naamwin-ire quickly advanced until he finally obtained his blasting certificate in 1961.

However, Naamwin-ire soon started to disagree with the union over ‘too many strikes’ and decided to look for a new job. In addition, some time in the early 1960s things between him and his wife became difficult and Naamwin-ire obtained a divorce. The year 1965 sees him at J. K. Motors in Kumasi for seven months and soon thereafter as a successful applicant for a job in the army—in Naamwin-ire’s eyes one of the most prestigious employers at the time. But the army officials failed to call him up for training and Naamwin-ire decided to accept work at AGC in Obuasi instead. By the time he returned to his army post to enquire about the training, he had already been dismissed as late. However, with his AGC job and a promotion to foreman in 1967, Naamwin-ire finally seemed to have come to accept Obuasi as his base and has since stayed there.

Like Walter Y., Naamwin-ire is an active member of the Dagaaba Family Group in Wawasi, a thirty member strong self-help organization that will be discussed further below. And like Walter, Naamwin-ire plans to return to his home area after retirement to adequately assume his duties as household head after the untimely death of his senior brothers. A few years ago he built a house, while still buying cattle and sending money to his junior brother who looks after the farm. But ideally, some of his eleven children, at least those who are attending

middle school, should stay behind in Obuasi so that AGC might take over their secondary school fees.

Clearly, Walter Y.’s and Naamwin-ire D.’s stories are telling examples of the numerous and overlapping strategies Dagara migrants have devised in coping with an unstable economic climate. But these strategies should not only be considered as mechanisms that have been created by the poorest and least successful migrants in search of security. They also constitute proper ways of accumulation that are deployed specifically by the better entrenched workers. Analytically these strategies can be divided into three groups: the combination of different sources of income with wage labour; the geographical diversification of economic activities within the extended family and the maintenance of close-knit home ties; and the involvement in ethnic forms of organization on the mines. In the social reality, of course, these three kinds of strategic responses are enmeshed—ethnic forms of organization depend on home ties which in turn, and at least partially, condition the nature of migrants’ sources of income. Thus although each of these types of strategies has been used—in varying degrees of combination and intensity—by the Dagara migrants whose life stories we were able to reconstruct, in the presentation of specific cases that follows we will concentrate only on one strategic response at a time.

Wage Labour, Farming, Bribery and Gold Theft:
The Combination of Sources of Income

Thomas D. is an accountant in the Tarkwa mine who has combined a variety of methods in trying to make ends meet. Thomas was born in Nandom in 1955, the son of a miner who worked in Tarkwa. At the age of thirteen, he joined his parents in Tarkwa and completed secondary school education in 1978. Things only started to get difficult when Thomas looked for a job. At first, he unsuccessfully tried to enter the army. In quick succession, only disrupted by a marriage and domestic problems, Thomas worked as a security officer in Tarkwa and Obuasi, and finally as a machine driver in Tarkwa. Plans to qualify as a blastman came to a halt when Thomas was beginning to suffer from chronic waist pains. So he was transferred to the accounts office and in 1988, shortly before we met him, he was moved to the Welfare Department. A highwater mark in Thomas’ life, however, must have been his term as chairman of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) in Tarkwa Goldfields between 1985 and 1988. The CDRs had been set up by the Rawlings government in 1983 to replace the former People’s Defence Committee in a general move to create a climate of class co-operation in Ghana. In his spare time, Thomas participates in evening
classes in the hope to obtain a post in the burgeoning administration of the newly constituted Upper West Region.15

But it was a budget for Thomas D.'s expenses and income in 1987-88 that more than anything else clearly revealed his attempts at a diversification of income generating activities. When we met Thomas, he had most recently moved to a section of the Dagarti Compound of Tarkwa Goldfields that offered slightly more comfortable conditions than the structures in the main compound further up the hill. There he lived with five of his brothers: his senior brother, Benjamin, who has been staying with Thomas since 1986 and works as a day labourer at the mine hospital; the twin junior brothers, Jonas and Germanus, who joined Thomas in 1987 after having been sacked from school in Nandom, and finally the junior brothers, Chrysanthus, who was awaiting enrollment at the local secondary school, and Silvanus, who preferred to stay at home.

With so many mouths—except for Benjamin—and his wife in Nandom at his parents' house to feed, Thomas quite literally had to put his hands to the plough. His annual cash income—including a canteen allowance and a 15% mining incentive—of C 128,748 hardly paid the bill. This tight economic situation was not significantly altered by the fact that—he like all employees—Thomas was entitled to a number of foodstuffs such as 40 kg of rice, sugar, oil and salted fish which the mine handed out monthly or bimonthly as part of a World Bank sponsored 'Food-for-Work' program. Not surprisingly then, in addition to these 'official' sources of Thomas' income, the mine, somewhat less obviously, also contributed to a rather involuntary form of intake in Thomas' purse. For as a member of the Board of Survey, Thomas was also in charge of the various scrap yards in Tarkwa Goldfields that were regularly being cleared out by local scrap dealers. And thus Thomas' kindness to some of his better acquaintances among Tarkwa's scrap dealers netted him another C 20,000 per annum.

What Thomas' partners in the scrap business were in Tarkwa, his friends and relatives were in Obuasi and at home. A paternal sister in Obuasi contributed C 17,000 for furniture, while his mother provided a bag of groundnuts. His wife, who had been helping out on his father's farm, sent a container of shea butter to Tarkwa. And Thomas, who had been helping on a friend's farm near Dagarti Compound, received a bowl of cassava every week.

As a result of Thomas' CDR activities he had only recently started his own small garden of half an acre. But later in the year he was hoping to harvest cassava and plantains. Together with some poultry and the sale of some of the crop, his farming activities, so Thomas reck-

15. This and the following paragraphs are based on interviews in English with Thomas D., Tarkwa, 6, 16, 18 Sept. 1988.
oned, would save him some C 70,000 per annum—half of his cash income—on foodstuffs he would otherwise have to buy on the local market.

But Thomas middle-of-the-road economic activities contrasted sharply with his rather liberal expenses. In addition to food (roughly C 30,000), clothing for his twin brothers (C 32,200) and himself (C 37,500), a good measure of pito surghum beer, palmwine, akpeteshie brandy and cigarettes (C 45,000), and donations at funerals, Thomas had spent huge lumps of money on his family in the North and his new home in Dagarti Compound. Close on C 70,000 had gone to his wife and father and a staggering C 180,400 was swallowed by new furniture and household items. Although this figure may be grossly exaggerated, it stands to reason that Thomas’ cash earnings of roughly C 166,000, together with some savings from previous years, stand against expenses in the region of C 400,000. How Thomas covered the balance of approximatively C 200,000 will always remain his secret. Claims by some of Thomas’ former CDR comrades that he had been bought by management could not be verified.

The example of Thomas D. shows the importance of complementary sources of income in migrant workers’ budgets, particularly of farming in and around the mining towns. In fact, the vast majority of our interviewees had resorted to farming. Most of these workers primarily used their produce for their own consumption and only occasionally sold a small surplus. But the quantities harvested varied considerably and ranged from anything between a paltry supplement to the purchased alimentation and more than half the equivalent of the monthly wage. The farms comprised two acres on average and were cultivated by the miners themselves. At peaks of labour demand, work parties of friends and relatives were organized and only occasionally was wage labour being used. But either way, in itself this farming ‘sector’ of the mining communities constitutes another ‘job market’ that provides irregular, small-scale income opportunities to a stratum of younger Dagara migrants who, for some reason or other, failed to enter the main labour force and who survive in the interstices of the dominant labour sector.

Access to land differs markedly in Tarkwa and Obuasi. While in Tarkwa abundant land is available on mine property at no extra charge, Obuasi miners have to lease land from the local landholders or from the traditional authority directly. The annual rent for such a plot can amount to as much as C 4,000 or more, a considerable investment that underscores the importance of farming to migrants. As we have seen, complementary farming has a long tradition among Ghana’s gold miners and has frequently been encouraged actively by the mines. But the extent to which miners derived additional means of livelihood from farming varied from period to period. The evidence from Dagara migrants in Tarkwa and Obuasi suggests that part-time farming has grown in importance ever since the beginning of the crisis in the 1970s,
and particularly since 1983, when food was practically unavailable on the local markets. Or as Samuel D., one of the few Dagara mines captains of the Tarkwa Goldfields, put it: 'It is now that I am doing more farming... now I know that if I don't farm, the work alone cannot do anything'.

The activation of supplementary sources of income is not restricted to the miners themselves, but also includes their families, in particular their wives. Dagara women hold a monopoly over the brewing of sorghum beer (pito) and in one way or another contribute to the family income. But the question in how far these activities must be considered as a mere complement to male income, as income pooling, or should rather be looked at as a base of female economic independence must be left to further investigation.

Whereas agricultural labour and pito brewing constitute traditional economic resources among the Dagara, a completely different set of income generating activities is centered around illegal practices such as bribery and theft, in particular theft of gold and mercury. Evidently, verifiable information was difficult to obtain, but both bribery and theft were a constant theme of conversation in both towns. In fact, a boom town life-style among sectors of the population in Obuasi created the impression of a rampant shadow economy as the real nerve center of the city's economic life. Either way, such activities are part of a continuum of practices that runs from petty crimes as regular wage complements to unexpected one time finds of nuggets big enough to serve as starting capital of a small business such as a taxi.

Bribery, for instance, may involve the forging of invoices, the paying of hush-money (in unions and political organizations), or the preferential allocation of contracts to outside contractors. Thus, the obligations of ethnic solidarity for many years led a Dagara official of the Survey Department at the Tarkwa mine to hand out lucrative contracts to a Dagara grass weeding entrepreneur, a deal that certainly made the two men richer and kept a number of grass weeder's in employ. Similarly, clerical posts are much sought after, for they offer ample opportunities to cash extra 'fees', such as for obtaining blasting certificates without regular attendance at courses, and for jobs in general. While the beneficiaries of such transactions are clearly the administrative staff, bribery connected with promotions to machine drivers, blastmen or foremen and particularly with gold theft also involves underground shift bosses and mines captains.

17. Don Robotham (1989: 85 sq.) also considers petty and everyday corruption as the most striking and determinant characteristic of the 'economic culture' in the Ghanaian mines, and interpretes them as strategies of clerical and supervisory staff on fixed salaries to deal with inflation. For more general discussion on corruption in developing countries, see Scott 1969.
Gold theft is a ‘tradition’ among Ghana’s miners that is as old as the industry itself. Labour historians have frequently viewed gold theft, and the theft of other minerals in general, as a ‘hidden form of resistance’ against capitalism and its attendant property laws. Thus, one economic historian in the course of a study on theft and social protest in the tin mines of Northern Nigeria, posits that theft ‘can play a major role alongside the more conventionally developed forms of working class protest; indeed, it can provide an effective vehicle of protest when and where conventional forms fail’. (Freund 1986: 49). Be this as it may, gold theft in Ghanaian mines carries with it a much less apparent ideological freight. What does seem clear, however, is that, apart from complicated smuggling procedures of the end product from the treatment plants, different geological formations in Tarkwa and Obuasi make for different methods of gold theft in each mine.

Because of the predominance of banket reef mining in Tarkwa, theft occurs primarily in form of gold washing. Gangs of young or pensioned miners called galamsey (pidgin word meaning ‘gather them and sell’) bring up ore from disused shafts, often at a considerable risk to their own lives. The ore is then crushed and washed with stolen mercury, a procedure that is often in the hands of women and in its techniques very much resembles preindustrial mining. In any case, galamsey work represents the most developed alternative to proletarianization among migrants as well as the local population and, in essence, means a return to complete autonomy and independence from the demands of mining capital. However, it was also claimed by some mining experts that the internal organization of galamsey gangs reproduced the division between capital and labour and the hierarchies of the ‘official’ mine.

In Obuasi larger quantities of gold may be accessible (and visible) as nuggets enclosed by quartz. Therefore both the theft and the processing of ore tends to concentrate in actual working stopes and is frequently in the hands of entire stope work gangs. These often stay underground after the shift and try to gain access to high grade ore areas when they are not being controlled by security personnel. Much of the ore thus obtained is immediately processed underground, and blastmen, shift bosses as well as security staff are given hush money. Some senior staff are said to ‘employ’ thieves whom they even bail out of prison and help to set up a trade after they have served a sentence for theft. According to AGC’s Assistant Chief Personnel Officer, Gabriel Nana Marfo, as much as 75% of the underground workforce are involved in gold theft in one form or another. Each day, two workers are arrested for possession of gold and each month, some fifty miners are dismissed for the same reason. With a bit of luck, a miner can make $10,000 a day, and some may even ‘earn’ $200,000 in one big coup. Because of the lucrative opportunities for gold theft in Obuasi, the security system and its attendant regulations are constant issues of conflict between miners
and management, and sometimes between thieves and security men that often end with casualties. Similarly, when in 1984 IMF experts insisted on a new security system by which ex-policemen were to be replaced by allegedly less corruptible staff, the measure met with bitter opposition from the workers, as did the decision by the State to deal with all cases involving gold theft in public tribunals instead of leaving it to the mine whether a case was taken to court or ‘solved’ by mere discharge.\textsuperscript{18}

In any case, the scope of gold theft and the intensity of conflicts around it show that theft constitutes one of the most lucrative wage supplements and that a position in the ‘formal economy’ is often not more than a mere pretext for illegal activities. But however attractive the prospects of rapid accumulation through theft may appear, few Dagara migrants seem to have managed to use the illegal sources in gaining a foothold in the urban ‘informal’ economy. While a number of Southerners in Obuasi run taxis or operate small stores, Dagara migrants seem to have invested primarily in consumer items, livestock and houses in their home regions. In part, these decisions may be explained by the widespread discrimination against Northerners that limits the capacity to establish business contacts in town.

The Role of Home Ties: Two Case Studies

Whereas supplementary farming, bribery and gold theft are strategies of economic diversification aiming at a minimization of risks and insecurity that are located within the mine towns themselves, Dagara migrants also heavily depend on methods of geographical diversification, namely on the maintenance of home ties. It is particularly within this context that Dagara miners’ strategies of survival also contain strong ideological components. This is most succinctly expressed in the images of Dagaraland held by the migrants as well as in their self-portrayal and self-reflection upon their own lives. A closer look at the fortunes of John N. and Lambert D., two miners in Tarkwa and Obuasi, exemplifies the fact that the economic relevance of home ties to migrant miners’ survival is clearly dependent on the position in the productive process. At the same time, the opportunities for manipulating and negotiating ethnic identities and networks of kin and regional solidarity increase in proportion to a more secure incorporation into the Southern economy.

When we met John N. in the Dagarti Compound of Tarkwa Goldfields he had but a few months to live. He died at the end of 1988 and thus the interview that he granted us quite unintentionally became his complete life story. John’s life was that of a typical first-generation

\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Gabriel Nana Marfo, Obuasi, 12 Sept. 1988.
Dagara miner. Born around 1938 in Burkina Faso and brought up on his father’s farm, John first migrated to Tarkwa in 1959. He worked as a shovelboy for a few months before he returned to his father’s home. This period of ‘initiation’ to the world of mining continued until 1961, when John returned home to marry. Back in Tarkwa he was again employed as a shovelboy, and, soon after his wife had joined him, he was made an underground loco driver, a position that he held until his retirement in 1988.

What is remarkable about this unspectacular and seemingly rectilinear road into the life of a permanently settled miner is the fact that after more than two decades of employment in Tarkwa—only interrupted by regular annual holidays in his native village—John N. was beginning to make concrete preparations for this return home. In 1983, he sent his wife home and organized the education of his children. In August 1988, eventually, after some months of patient waiting, he himself boarded the company truck that takes pensioned miners and their belongings to the North. John had hoped to benefit from his monthly pension, but he died soon afterwards.

While it is one thing to extract the straight ‘facts’ from an interview, it is another to decipher the hidden meaning, the motives and rationalizations woven into such a discourse. For, on the surface, N.’s words are a tale of domestic and ethnic cohesion, interlaced with nostalgic reminiscences about the attraction of Western dress:

**Question**: Do you know the first time you came down South, how you came and why you came?

**Answer**: When we came, that time everybody was going down South, it was because of clothing that we came down here and we were here. [. . .] It’s the clothes that those who have been here bring home and wear that we saw, and we also came down.

Q: Did you not hear anything about ‘Kumasi’?

A: To tell the truth, at that time when they come [i.e. those who have been South] and bring their shorts and trousers and everything, you become excited. So when you come of age, you also come down [all laugh]. So when you have come whatever it is that you have come for, if it is work and you get it, you do it, and also look for your clothing. *That* time we didn’t lack, we came here and saw that there was food here and everything fine. And we were eating and working. When you worked up to five months or four months you have stayed long, then you stopped. [. . .] When you have got enough clothing for you to go home and make *life* [i.e. to show off], oh you are gone! You go and farm and once the farming is done you’re back South again.

Q: When you were coming to ‘Kumasi’ for the first time, when you were leaving your family for the first time, how did you feel about it?

A: It was not like a fight or anything of that sort. As I said, it is the clothes your friends wear. In those days, they used to say that they have been measured [i.e. their measurements were taken for tailor-made dresses]. So even if your

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father had money to buy clothes for you, and it is not your proper measurement, then you are not happy, and you will also like to come down here and have clothes sewn according to your size, so that it can fit you and you will be happy.

Q: But what I am asking is this, usually when you are going somewhere you know you will miss your people for some time. [...] So I'm asking in your case, when you were leaving your family for the first time to an unknown place, how did you feel about it?

A: It was a joy to me and my family. I was excited about it and my family told me to go and come back. [...]  

Q: How did you know that there was work in Tarkwa here?

A: Well, at that time our people were working here and they used to come home from time to time. So when one was coming down to your people who were already here, you would stay with them. So even at that time you were more than ten people staying in one room and you will all be very happy about it. You will even buy the same cloth to sew dresses so that when you go home you will all wear the same dresses and be happy [laughs] [...].

Q: Did you come down here on your own?

A: Yes [...]. If your family agrees to your coming they give you the money and tell you that they have their relatives at such and such a place, Tarkwa or Prestea or Obuasi. Then you just go straight to them. When you arrive that time, they will prepare food and you all eat and they will help you find work.

Two things are striking about this eulogy of N.'s early career: the emphasis on the collectivity—the home, the family and the group of Dagara workmates—and the importance of clothing. N. rarely seems to have made decisions on his own, for not only did the family encourage his leaving for Tarkwa, it was also the parents who decided about his domestic affairs: 'they took care of all the dowry [...], they sent her down here... and they sent her to the house to stay for some time' after the couple had their first child. As for the prominent place of Western clothing in N.'s discourse, it is explained by the fact that in an area of Ghana where many people in the more remote villages were still wearing bark cloth, leaves and animal skins until well into the 1950s, tailored dresses became a symbol of modernity, progress and 'civilization' as such. But rather than being used as a vehicle of assimilation to a Southern 'way of life', Western clothing was transformed into a way of asserting one's status at home.20

Irrespective of all the relevance of the family during John N.'s working life, there was hardly a stronger indication of his rural orientation than his plans for his retirement age.

Q: Now that you are on pension and waiting for a lorry to send you home, what are your plans, what do you want to do?

A: Right now my plan is that, when I get home, I will then decide exactly what I want to do. Now I am no more working, so there is nothing for me to do again. So, it is only when I go home, and see what is happening in the house, that I can

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make plans. But when I go home, I will certainly go back to farming since that is what I was doing before I came here [...].

Q: To you, which place is better than the other, here or back at home? And where do you feel happier?
A: I feel happier back at home up North.

Q: Why do you feel happier at home?
A: So that is where I was born, but it was because I needed money to buy clothes and to do other things that I came down here and stayed until this time. [...] Here, too, when you are in difficulty there is nobody to help you, but if you are at home, and you are in trouble, your people, who are there, will not leave you to suffer so much. For that matter, up North is better than here.

Q: Since you like home more than here, what has made you stay here so long?
A: That was what I said. In one year you can go home about three times and all this involves money. When you come, it won't take long and you have to go home again to attend another funeral. It is because of all this, that we stay here for so long, so as to get some money to do something in the house [...] When you get the money, and there is nobody back at home to support you, you cannot do anything meaningful. But if you have people to support you, like the family at home, you can do whatever you want to do, is that not right?

Q: Now, let us say that you have the support of your family back at home, what will you like to do if you had the money?
A: They will have to decide what will be useful to the whole family.

For all the praise of home and the family, a profound ambiguity runs through N.'s narrative, namely the apparent 'contradiction' between the images of a harmonious home in the North and a life in Tarkwa that must have been tolerable enough to keep him for twenty-seven years. It seems paradoxical that it was the very home ties that provided security and comfort in times of stress, which also prevented John from accumulating enough money for a definitive move home. What is likely to be at the root of this post facto rationalization is John N.'s inability to gain a strong social and economic foothold in the urban economy beyond the orbit of the mine. His deep bonds with his extended family and its nucleus in the North had been a fact in all John's life. But it was only through the actual crisis, when 'we just do not know what at all is happening and we just suffer, suffer everywhere', that these bonds loomed large in his mind.

Lambert D., a mines captain in his fifties at AGC, is by all accounts a 'big man'. An impressive looking man of strong build and with a booming voice, Lambert fetched us for the interview with him, rather than us looking him up at his house. In a cortège of two cars, we were taken on a whirlwind tour of restaurants and bars where we were treated to an assortment of beers and fried chicken, each portion being worth at least as much as one quarter of a machine driver's monthly pay check. After this, followed a défilé through Tutuka, one of Obuasi's popular quarters with numerous miners and migrants (Lambert D. said: 'Everybody knows me here...'), and to a village outside Obuasi where Lambert pointed to his own new house under construction. In the end, we
arrived at his lavishly furnished house, in an AGC owned housing complex for senior staff, situated on a hill overlooking the mine workers' barracks. After a further display of video and other hi-fi installations, Lambert D. eventually proceeded to a lengthy statement about his career:

'I come from Wogi, a village 26 miles from Wa. We are farmers, and when I was young I was farming. I never went to school. Then, in 1950, I went to Bibiani and I was working in the mines until 1951, when I left the work and went back home. Then in 1952, I left home and went to Tarkwa and I was working in the mines. Meanwhile, I was not yet married. In 1957, I passed out as a blastman. In 1959, I married and had my first born in 1960. Still in Tarkwa, my wife conceived again and went home to deliver and I also left the work in Tarkwa and came to Obuasi here in 1960. I came here and I was staying with a cousin called Kabieta, and in 1961, I was employed in Obuasi here. At the time I was being employed they did not need blastmen, so I was employed as a general labourer underground. Because I was already married at that time, I could not wait till they were in need of blastmen before I could be employed. At the work place, the way I was doing the work made the white man in charge at that time to ask me what work I was doing before I came to Obuasi, because he could see that the way I was working did not show that I was a new worker in the mines. So I told him that actually I was working at Tarkwa and I even had a blasting ticket. That time the mines captain was a Mr. Bottomney, and he asked me to bring my blasting ticket. So I brought the ticket to him, and he looked at it, and there was nothing wrong with it, and so he made them to change me to a blastman. From then on I was still working and they were observing the way I was working. Then one day, one of the white shift bosses called me and told me that he would like to make me a foreman. That man was also called Lambert. He was a hard worker and I too was a hard worker. So this man observed my work and said that I was just like him and he gave me the name Lambert. So, since we were then two Lamberts, he called me Lambert D. Then he made me a foreman at Justice Shaft. The shift boss I was working with at that place also observed my work and said I could become a shift boss. So he took me to the mines captain, a Mr. Richard, and said he would like me to be made a shift boss. Then they took me for an interview at the mines school and I passed the interview and became a shift boss in 1965, on 12th July, and I was brought to this house [i.e. senior staff bungalows]. I was still serious about the work and they again took me to the mines captains course in 1975 and there too I passed and became a mines captain. I worked seriously as a mines captain and in 1976 I was sent overseas on tour and visited some mines and returned back to Obuasi. There I worked until today and ever since I have been working with this company nobody has ever called me to his office to give me warning. And even the day you came to the shaft, the white man [Mines Manager] who handed you over to me said that I have worked there for a long time and I know what is happening underground. So if I took you underground there will be no fears'.

The remainder of the interview consisted of an exchange of short questions and short answers, but what clearly emerges from this and the opening statement is a certain ambiguity between Lambert’s feelings of indebtedness and the resultant obligations towards his relatives on the one hand, and the self-portrayal of a self-made man who makes his way

up through hard work and intelligence on the other. Whereas John N. never made any attempts to advance beyond the position of a loco driver and saw his career as an extension of the 'we'-group, Lambert D. presented his story much more in the 'I'-form. The organization of a night school to learn English, a high awareness of the different wage systems and levels in Ghana's mines and the determination to take advantage of them, further illustrate his strong personality and initiative.

The grand introduction and the ease in subsequent dealings with us also suggest a much more flexible handling of ethnic boundaries than was the case in John N.'s life story. Whereas N. in spite of inevitable contacts with other 'tribes' and whites at the worksite never made friends with non-Dagara, Lambert had a great deal of intercourse with whites, because of his exposed position, and boasted of many white visitors and his trip to Europe. Nevertheless, Lambert's fluent relations with whites cannot gloss over a strong undercurrent of racial bias within mine society. The exigencies of the work process and the specific characteristics of occupational careers underground render the allocation of jobs such as machine driver and blastman along ethnic lines impracticable. However, both in Tarkwa and Obuasi a certain kind of ethnic differentiation exists between Southern surface employees and Northern underground workers. Furthermore, in Obuasi more than in Tarkwa, a sizeable group of white expatriates occupies the top notches of the mine hierarchy. It is within this matrix of black/white and Northern/Southern tensions, tightly interlaced with conflict between order-givers and order-takers, that Lambert D. plays the role of an ethnic broker and at the same time intermediary between capital and labour. And it is within this context that his close knit home ties come to play an important part.

On the one hand, Lambert is useful to AGC in that he quite visibly represents a living 'African' success story. With a salary at least five times that of an ordinary machine driver, Lambert demonstrates the potential for black discipline and toil and more particularly the fact that even the often discriminated against Dagara, the majority of the underground work force, can make their way up through 'hard work'. At the same time, he clearly plays the role of an overseer, a fact which was brought home to us quite forcibly when Lambert D. in front of us ostentatiously and harshly reprimanded a miner who had fallen asleep on the job. And finally, he is able to use his 'big man' status and his intimacy with the Dagara language and 'way of life' to appease workers in conflicts between management and labour. On the other hand, Lambert D. is a truly popular figure who stands up for the miners. In cases of gold theft, for instance, he has been known for vouching for the accused.22

Most probably, Lambert D.'s flexibility to manoeuvre between ethnic boundaries and his capacity to gain support from Northerners, underground workers, and from Southerners and clerical staff alike, are based on his public demonstrations of inter-ethnic comradeship. A Lambert D. clad in Ashanti dress has been a common sight at Ashanti funerals in Obuasi for many years, and few are those who would not believe that he keeps a local Adansi mistress. But more important is the fact that during the 1979 electoral campaign, instead of supporting the Northerner Dr. Liman, Lambert D. made speeches in which he promised to bring the entire Dagara community of Obuasi to vote en bloc for the Ashanti presidential candidate of the United National Convention party.

How precisely all this benefitted Lambert materially is difficult to establish. But what seems amply clear is the fact that Lambert's virtuosity of handling such networks that cross-cut both ethnic boundaries and social strata is crucial to his 'big man' status. At the same time, Lambert's stature among the Dagara and their loyalty towards him are an essential bargaining chip. Lambert D. has to reaffirm his credentials as a Dagara not only towards the whites and the Ashanti, but also with his own people. For Lambert D., his dictum that 'you should never deny what you are' is also a daily lived reality: he frequently wears the Northern smock, insisted on giving the interview in Dagara, and proudly showed us a video of benda dances his son had taken at a Dagara funeral. And he is also the patron of the Dagaaba Association in Obuasi which assembles Dagara migrants from the areas of Wa, Nandoli, Kaleo and surroundings. But for all Lambert's 'political' adroitness, he is not simply manipulating an amorphous and willing Dagara constituency. Real emotional ties to his family and second wife in the North take him on annual trips to his native village and make him the natural port of call of a wide circle of friends and relatives who come to Obuasi in search of work and advice.

But for all his attachment to the North, Lambert does not seem to be cutting himself off completely from other alternatives: 'When I retire from the work, and I see that I can live in Obuasi here, then I will stay here, but if I find that it will be better in the house then I will go home. As for that one it is up to me'.

Without doubt the stories of John N. and Lambert D. are prominent and somewhat opposite examples of the ways in which Dagara miners use home ties for their survival.23 For Lambert, they form an additional

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23. Our assumption that the character and the role of home ties varies greatly according to the nature of the economic and social incorporation of the migrant into the Southern economy receive support from studies by Keith Hart (1975) and Jacob Songsore (1983). For a more general discussion of the relevance of home ties and ethnic organization, particularly in the urban 'informal' economy in Ghana, see the classical study of Rouch (1956) and the works of Hart (1971), Fortes (1971), Nabila (1974), Schildkrout (1978) and Franke
asset to his career in Obuasi. As the circulation of economic resources demonstrates; for John N., as for the majority of interviewees, the links with the extended family and the rural base are a matter of old-age insurance. In most of these migrants’ lives, the flow of cash, services and produce from the North to the mines plays a secondary role, but substantial funds and labour for livestock and houses travel the opposite way. Likewise, the economic activities of the extended family as the essential material foundation of miners’ lives, have in no case been drawn completely into the orbit of wage labour. As the genealogies of John N., Lambert D. and a handful of other interviewees reveal, there have been isolated instances of a father or brother migrating to the mines for very brief periods, but never of a majority of the entire patrilineage. With other options such as clerical work, farm labour and independent farming in the North being available, mining remains only a marginal factor within the economic activities of the extended family.

Ethnic Organization: Dagara Chieftaincy in Tarkwa

Home ties not only constitute a central element in individual migrants’ strategies of survival and accumulation. They are also at the base of collective forms of organization, namely ethnic institutions, in which all interviewees, in one way or another, were involved alongside with their activities in labour unions and catholic or, to a lesser degree, protestant churches. Ethnicity and ethnic institutions, such as the chieftaincy in the modern African urban economy, have frequently been viewed as expressions of strategies of control from corporate capital or colonial administrations. As has been noted, within the context of Ghana’s gold mines, Crisp and other authors have given little attention to the role of ethnicity in the formation and development of mine labour in Ghana. In fact, it is Crisp’s assertion (1984: 119, 182 sq.) that ‘tribal’ institutions, such as chiefs, were artificially created by management in order to divert from the real power conflicts within the mine that run along class lines.

In contrast to this view, it is argued here that such conflicts along class lines, notwithstanding struggles in Ghana’s mine industry, are shot

(1983). For a Latin American case study of the economic, social and cultural relevance of home ties in the migratory situation, as well as the material and ideological changes introduced in the original village, see Lentz 1988.

24. This is underlined in a study by Francis Saighoe (1984) among the Dagara of Tarkwa which argues that even in the late 1970s, migratory patterns remained essentially rotatory due to the fact that miners preferred to send their Tarkwa born children back home to take advantage of free secondary education in the North. Nearly all of Saighoe’s interviewees wanted their offsprings to become something ‘better’ than a miner.
through with other divisions and oppositions. Running against the
grain of the divide between capital and labour, and at times even bridging
between the two social forces are a whole variety of forms of ethnic
organization and ideologies. Far from being exclusively an instrument
of domination from above and being functional to the demands of capital,
ethnic solidarity can also form an asset to migrants’ struggle for survival.  
The ambiguity of ethnicity in the context of mine labour is most vividly
illustrated by the Dagara chieftaincy in Tarkwa, particularly the life and
work of Chief Kweku, the most legendary figure in the history of the
mine’s ‘tribal heads’.

By the time of Kweku’s death at the end of 1987, he was already
something of a myth. With ninety-odd years, Kweku’s life had straddled
several generations of Dagara miners in Tarkwa and thus, not suprisingly,
there was more than one version of his life story circulating among
young migrants and old hands, friends and workmates alike. Thus, for
one younger miner it was the Dagara who appointed him as their spokes-
man because he [...] did not fear to speak his peace of mind even to the
bosses  
whereas others, and particularly Kweku’s contemporaries were
convinced that he ‘was helping the whites and the whites too were helping
him’. Some saw him as a union leader, but one union official bluntly
declared that he ‘was bought by management’. A few miners consid-
ered him as a man who had become rich at the expense of his ‘tribesmen’,
by collecting money from the mine to which they were entitled and by
letting them work on his large cassava farm. His age-mate Maama D.,
however, sarcastically remarked: ‘He had nothing, not at all! [...] He
was just useless’. In this sense, what follows is per force only another
version—our version—of Chief Kweku’s life.

Kweku was born in the late 1890s at Nandom. His life seems to
have passed in three phases: a period of ‘initiation’ to migrancy and
mining from the 1910s to the mid-1930s; a mature period until the time
of Ghana’s independence that sees him at the height of his power as
chief and labour recruiter; and a final phase of retirement and declining
power until his death in 1987.

25. See Epstein (1958) for a thorough analysis—with some similarities with our
case—of the interfaces (and conflicts) between a system of ‘tribal elders’ and
trade unions in a Copperbelt situation. Few other and practically no recent
studies have systematically explored the role of ethnic chieftaincy in the mines,
but some underline the importance of ethnic organizations. For instance
Mitchell (1956) and, more recently, Van Onseelen (1980: ch. 5, 6, 7). The
role of home ties and ethnicity as organizational bases among urban immigrants
has been studied by numerous scholars, such as Enid Schildkrot (1978)
and Elliott Skinner (1974) and various authors in Kuper (1965), to name
just a few examples from West Africa.

29. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
Kweku, or Yezargal as he was then called, was born into the patri- 
clan of the *tengan-sob*, the hereditary Dagara custodian of the earthshrine 
of Nandom. What prompted the young Yezargal to leave the ‘tra- 
ditional’ mode of life as a farmer is not clear, but by 1910 we see him 
walking all the way to Techiman to hire himself out as a farm labourer. 
Although he lacked the strength to do hard farm work, after two years 
the young man had accumulated sufficient funds to do what generations 
of Dagara migrants were to do after him—he bought Western clothes and 
returned home. By 1915 he was back in Techiman, only to realize that 
much more attractive jobs were to be had in Kumasi. And so Yezargal 
walked to Kumasi and changed his name to the Ashanti name Kweku 
in order to slip into the little enviable position of a fugitive sanitary 
worker named Kweku. By the following year he was already able to 
settle into the more prestigious and clearly more hygienic function of a 
security guard at the Asantehene’s palace. It is here that Kweku for 
the first time must have tasted the savour of power, for—as his ‘bio-
grapher’ and protégé Jonas B. put it—he ‘used to go to town and seize 
people’s money or just beat them up’. 30 Possibly as a result of the post 
World War I depression, Kweku was eventually thrown into the army 
of jobless in the town and had to bring himself through as a petty thief. 
This thorny road was to be his until 1921 by which time Kweku went 
back home, married, soon after left for Accra and managed to get back 
into more regular day-time jobs. However, his parents sharply criticized 
him for abandoning his wife in Nandom, and Kweku saw himself obliged 
to fetch her and take her along to Kumasi where, due to his intimacy 
with the locality, he found work as a lorry conductor for a number of 
years. Yet in 1929 Kweku decided to leave Kumasi and his wife for a 
position in Tarkwa as a shovelboy and later as a bellman until the mid-
1930s. Thus, from his early days at Techiman as a farm labourer to his 
arrival at Tarkwa, Kweku had gained a good measure of experience in 
the woofs and warps of migrancy, wage labour and criminality. But 
the most valuable asset of these early years of ‘initiation’ was—as his 
successor and acting Dagara chief mines captain G. B. K. aptly phrased 
it: ‘he knew how human relationship works’. 31 It was this knowledge 
that was to prove invaluable during his mature life as chief and labour 
recruiter from the mid-1930s to the 1960s.

The years 1935-36 were an important break in the history of gold 
mining in Tarkwa. In 1935 a number of smaller mines were fusioned to 
form the Amalgamated Banket Area, the precursor of today’s Tarkwa 
Goldfields Ltd. The following year a new shaft known as AVS (Akoon 
Vertical Shaft) was opened and new residential bungalows and mine

30. Interview with Jonas B., see fn. 26.
workers' compounds such as the AVS compound were built. It is against the background of this expansion that Kweku's further career has to be seen when in 1935-36 his fortune became irreversibly linked with the struggles in and around the Tarkwa mine.

While Kweku was working as a bellman at the new shaft top—so popular memory has it—an elderly Sisala kola nut trader, named Isaka, seems to have been chief of all Northerners in Tarkwa. But because Isaka was not a mine worker and probably did not manifest qualifications for his position as chief other than his seniority, he was not 'satisfactory' in serving the policy of co-opted 'tribal headmen' Ghanaian mines were groping towards in the late 1930s. The Labour Department had been moting proposals that in lieu of trade unions 'tribal' chiefs should be used as brokers between management, government and the workers. Although the plan did not materialize, by this time Kweku had already successfully demonstrated his ability in applying the skills he had acquired at the royal palace in Kumasi to the backs of miners in Tarkwa: he 'used to whip' them and, in short, acquired the dubious renown of an authoritarian overseer. But apart from the whip, Kweku must also have wielded considerable power over his fellow Dagara workers through his superior experience and possibly because of his being a member of the tengan-sob clan. It is this ambiguity in the relationship between ethnic power and mine hierarchy that produces two contrasting versions about Kweku's ascendency to the position of 'tribal headman' of all Dagara in Tarkwa.

According to some he was just appointed from above, by the white management, whereas others believed that it was a popular vote that brought him into office. Be this as it may, as one widespread and probably the most credible version has it, 'Kweku's chieftaincy came first from the mines and all the Dagara agreed and accepted him as their chief'. In material terms, Kweku's new position was linked to the role as compound headman, a position under the authority of the mine's Welfare Officer to which he was transferred soon after his nomination as Dagara chief. As compound headman, he had to settle internal disputes and bail workers out of jail, so that their absence might not disturb the production process. But more importantly, the mine used him as a labour recruiter from as early as the late 1930s. Thus while management and Dagara miners may have had quite different reasons for choosing Kweku as 'their' chief, both were to a certain degree dependent on him because of his success as labour recruiter. That the Ghanaian gold

32. See Crisp (1984: 70 sq.), and Robotham (1989: 43 sq., 53) for further details on official politics concerning ethnic chieftaincy in the mines; and lADouceur (1979), as well as Some (1969) on the chieftaincy in the Northern Territories in general and among the Dagara in particular.
33. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
34. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
mines had been able to continually enlarge their workforce until the late 1930s, hinged in part on the use of labour recruiters whose role gained even more impact during World War II when relevant parts of the mine workers were drawn into war related activities. Kweku was certainly one of the more important recruiters at Tarkwa, and apart from the company's backing he also enjoyed the support of the Nandom-naa, one of the Dagara paramount chiefs in the North. Although Kweku's area of operation covered the entire Northern Territories, it may be in part due to him that by the mid-1950s, Dagara migrants for the first time came to constitute the largest single ethnic group of the underground workforce at Tarkwa. This fact not only gained him certain privileges vis-à-vis the management, but it also gave him considerable leverage over the Dagara miners. After all, it was through Kweku that they had been able to find work in the increasingly saturated labour market. As late as the mid-1950s, so Maama D. recalls, Kweku used to tell 'all the Dagara workers that it was through him that they were all there in the mines and so [. . .] if any person refused to comply then he would sack him and send him back to his village. And when he said that all the Dagartis agreed to what he said, it was because they knew very well that if he asked the manager to sack someone the manager would certainly do it'.

In the final analysis then it was Kweku's ideological influence and physical power over Dagara miners, as well as the structural dependence of the workers on Kweku as the purveyor of work that made for his popularity on both sides of the class spectrum. The ambiguity between management strategy and popular consent is reflected both in the rationalizations offered by present-day miners and in the images of chiefly ritual that are woven around Kweku's 'installation'. Those who saw Kweku's rise to chiefly power as a matter of popular consensus, pointed to the cultural continuity of appointing chiefs and, in traditional fashion, derived Kweku's legitimacy from his status as pioneer. Not surprisingly, as the adequate expression of such traditionally legitimized power, Kweku was said to have been 'carried around in the same way the Ashantis carry their chief' during his installation ceremony, whereas his age-mate Maama D. insists that 'when we accepted him as our chief, we took him to Apinto shaft to have his name officially written as the chief of the Dagartis [. . .], but we did not make any ceremony to proclaim him chief [. . .]'.

As is often the case in African systems of chieftaincy, the precarious balance of domination and acceptance in institutions of traditional

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35. Interview with Maama D., see fn 27.
37. Interview with Jonas B., see fn 26.
38. Interview with Maama D., see fn 27.
power is ritually confirmed and kept alive by elaborate systems of reciprocal exchange. And thus, it remains one of the most long-lived collective memories and at the same time the probably most graphic illustration of Kweku’s popularity that he was ‘helpful’, truthful and generous. For every C 300 that he earned, his wife recalls, he called people for a ‘dinner’. ‘He made a party and invited people because the money was too much’.39 Kweku’s duties as chief seem to have been quite varied. Again stressing the more ‘traditional’ aspects of Dagara chieftaincy, most informants saw him as a general ‘problem solver’ in domestic disputes and sometimes even intertribal conflicts, in the reception and care of new arrivals, in the organization of funerals of Dagara migrants who could not count on the support of relatives in Tarkwa, and in bailing out workers from jail, a duty which again seems to have been intimately related with the interests of mine management.

In 1954, Kweku married his second wife, Efua K., the sister of the Nandom-naa. This new liaison probably not only earned him additional prestige among the more traditionally minded Dagara, but also fostered his ‘business’ links and joint recruiting activities with the paramount chief. The couple first lived in the AVS compound. By that time the barrack-like structures were still known as ‘Nigeria’ compound, because they were predominantly occupied by Nigerian, mainly Igbo expatriate miners. And it was a conflict between these Nigerians and the Dagara in the compound that shortly after Kweku’s marriage became the first major crisis that he had to endure. Tensions between the Nigerians and Dagara had been simmering for some time, and it took a minor dispute between two families about an instance of ‘tribal’ abuse (popular memory has it that a Muslim Nigerian boy made ridicule of a young Dagara for not being circumcised and hence being ‘uncivilized’) to set the entire compound into revolt. In the course of the violent clashes, Chief Kweku sought protection from management. Collecting the labour cards of all Dagara and threatening that the entire Dagara workforce would resign, Kweku insisted on the construction of a separate compound for Dagara, Gonja and Frafra workers. The new compound was eventually built and exists until today as Dagarti Compound.

But there is also another side to the story. The conflict at ‘Nigeria’ compound took place around 1955, during the ferment of labour militancy that preceded the general mines strike of 1955-56. In how far the outbreak of ethnic animosity was in fact the expression of real, but largely hidden cleavages underneath the surface of seeming worker unity, remains unclear. But if we are to believe the words of Kweku’s contemporary, Maama D.,40 a building contractor, and as such not exactly

40. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
suspected of militant union positions, Kweku was using the ‘Nigeria’ crisis to divide the workers:

‘It was because of their (i.e. the workers) not going for work that he made the management to divide the compounds into Dagarti compound and Nigeria compound [. . .]. He said because the workers were staying together in one compound, it was easier for them to organize themselves, so he asked the management to divide them and let them live in separate compounds’.

The same ambiguity of ethnic and chiefly policy became again manifest in Kweku’s involvement with the mine workers’ union. Someone who not only witnessed Kweku’s ambiguous role from the heights of the union executive in Tarkwa, but who was also endowed with a pragmatic sense of power relations, was I.A., erstwhile Mine Workers Union General Secretary and at the time branch secretary. In the beginning, I.A. recalls, relations between MWU and Chief Kweku were cordial. Kweku was even sitting on the MWU executive in his capacity as ‘chief advisor for the Dagarti community [. . .], so that as the head of the Dagarti community, the Northerners, he will go there and tell them the outcome of our meetings. And then, whenever we faced some difficulties, he called the attention of the union leaders and we went there to talk to the people, and the people in fact understood his problems or understood the issue. So at that time, we were working hand in hand with Chief Dagarti and his elders’.

Things took a turn for the worse, when Kweku was beginning to be suspected of embezzling workers’ entitlements and groups of workers entered into wildcat strikes over the issue. Although the matter was officially settled, Kweku not only began to incite workers against the union, but eventually seemed to have changed sides to become a management informant. When he was finally removed from the executive in 1953-54 to take a position on the union’s advisory board instead, it was ‘not because of his underground activities’, I.A. insisted, but because:

‘Northerners respect the chieftaincy. We thought it was prudent that if he was allowed to look after his people, that would be better [. . .] We had him as an advisor so that he would interpret the real union policies to his people and then he would also be able to feed us with their feelings’.

Thus stood things when the 1955-56 general mines strike eventually broke out. For some observers, Kweku quite simply played the role of a salaried ‘union worker’, while others saw in Kweku one of the prime movers against the strike who ‘forced a lot and that made the whites like

41. Interview with I. A., see fn. 28.
42. Interview with I. A., see fn. 28.
him so much. He fought to get the workers to return to work.43 But as is often the case in African social conflict, the various social actors in the strike rather than engaging in downright confrontation were careful not to burn their boats. And thus the picture of chiefly solidarity with the strikers that his widow painted, contains probably more than just a grain of truth:

'That strike lasted three months and all the workers left the place and went to villages to farm, leaving only the women and the children. Only the chief was left and he had a cassava farm which he was using to feed the women and the children'.44

The strike was successful, but it also marked a turning point in Kweku's career and the beginning of the last age period. From about 1961 Kweku relinquished his duties as labour recruiter, and in about 1965 he stopped being an employee of the Welfare Department altogether. But since he was still a force to reckon with, union officials pressured the mine to give Kweku a contract as an independent entrepreneur in charge of weeding in and around the compounds. But how influential a figure Kweku continued to be can best be gauged from another major conflict towards the end of the 1970s, possibly the last political conflict in his long life and one that seems to have sounded the death knell of the Dagara chieftaincy in Tarkwa. But this story is perhaps best told in the words of Maama D.:45

'He was looking after all Dagartis. But there came a quarrel. A woman was in labour and he asked the woman's husband to take the woman to hospital and the woman died at the hospital. But he went back to the woman's husband and asked for thirty pounds for the doctor. It was this thirty pounds that he collected and said he was going to give to the doctor. But when we asked the doctor he said it was not so. It was after this incident that we separated and all those around Wa went on their own. That was how we separated'.

The meaning of this split into a fraction of Dagara from Nandom, Jirapa, and Lawra and a fraction of Dagaaba from Wa, Nandoli and Kaleo, each with their own tribal authorities, in the present-day scenery of Dagara ethnic politics in Tarkwa remains somewhat elusive. But what seems clear is the fact that it highlights the close relationship between 'home' politics, patterns of rural-regional identification, and the system of chieftaincy in the mines which had been so deeply shaped by Kweku. At the same time, the multiplication of chiefly positions seems to be an indicator of a decline of the tribal head's power. The functions

43. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
44. Interview with Efua K., see fn. 39.
45. Interview with Maama D., see fn. 27.
once united in one and the same person—mediation in conflicts of Dagara with management and other 'outside' authorities, settlement of internal disputes, provision of accommodation and job opportunities for new migrants and support in cases of emergencies like sickness, accidents and death—are now distributed among various individuals and institutions.

Whether Kweku's role as labour recruiter, informant and chief had any material benefits, is a matter of dispute among his followers and opponents. But in any event, they can only have been tangential. In 1969, he bought a house in Abontiakoon, a mining village not far from Dagarti compound, from Nigerians who had to leave Ghana in the wake of the Aliens Compliance Order. In addition, he purchased a house at Nandom that was occupied by his daughter Ajara. Chief Kweku died, aged well over 90, at the end of 1987 and it was in Nandom that his body was eventually laid to rest. After Kweku's death, his former assistant and putative senior Dagara migrant in Tarkwa, mines captain G.B.K., was made Acting Chief, without having been formally installed as legitimate chief since. But in any case, Captain K. went on pension in 1989 and is preparing for his return home. Thus the future of the Dagara chieftaincy remains open.

In Obuasi, for reasons that are not yet clear, the erosion of the Dagara chieftaincy seems to have been much speedier than in Tarkwa. By the early 1950s, the Grushi chief of Obuasi who had been in charge of all Northerners was no longer accepted by the growing Dagara community. Both he and his Dagara successors never had as close a link with the mine as had Chief Kweku in Tarkwa. Although serving as a port of call for Dagara newcomers in Obuasi, none of the Dagara chiefs occupied an important position within the mine hierarchy nor did they mediate in worker-management conflicts. The history of Dagara chieftaincy in Obuasi rather seems to have been one of a steady decline through a succession of a number of 'weak' chiefs and as a result of regional divisions. The present Acting Chief of the Dagara of Obuasi plays a very restricted role as a peacemaker, and it is probably as a result of this vacuum of ethnic power that people such as Lambert D. were able to play the role of an 'ethnic broker' and intermediary in the mine hierarchy.

Ethnic Organization: The Case of the Dagaaba Family Group in Obuasi

While the decline of the role of ethnic chiefs as mediators in interethnic conflict as well as, more generally, industrial relations is reflected in the emergence of 'big men' such as Lambert D., weakened chiefly authority and responsibility with regard to internal community affairs favor the development of ethnically based voluntary associations. Such associations not only assume those obligations of the tribal chiefs that
were directed towards mutual assistance, they also effect a transition to modern, more participatory forms of political decision making.

One of these ethnic voluntary associations in Obuasi is the Dagaaba Family Group. The association comprises Dagara miners in the AGC housing scheme Wawasi and was formed in early 1987 with the aim, as its neatly typewritten constitution states:

‘a. To help the growth and development of fraternal relationship amongst its members and to help one another in the event of death, sickness or distress.

b. To make provision against time of distress, settle misunderstandings that may exist among members and to maintain any cordial relationship that may exist among its members’.

By September 1988, the group had twenty-nine members of whom seventeen were men and twelve were women. Most of the women were married to male members, but had only been admitted to the association after long and protracted debates in which it was argued that the women ‘will be bringing a lot of problems and they will be placing their problems on the men’. In particular, it was alleged that some women would expect their husbands to pay their monthly dues and that the men in turn would be either unwilling or incapable to pay on time. Furthermore, the bachelors in the group feared that the presence of married couples would make them feel ‘alone and embarrassed’. Whereas these doubts were soon overcome, in other matters the association anxiously continues to avoid all decisions and activities that might cause internal conflict and provoke an untimely break up of the group. The founding members decided, for instance, to strictly limit membership to Dagara residents in Wawasi, an area that Walter Y. considers as a place where ‘we could easily understand each other since we are living in an area that is very cool [i.e. peaceful] and not like those living in town’. Walter’s opinion might contain a grain of truth, as only the better paid members of the workforce, from blastmen upwards, are entitled to one of the small, relatively modern bungalows in Wawasi. As a consequence, three shift bosses and two foremen are among the most prominent male members of the Dagaaba Family Group. They are joined by a few conservancy labourers, welfare stewards and hospital wardens as well as the ‘controller’ of AGC club and, as the only female member in regular employment, a nurse of the mine hospital. The only machine driver in the group does not presently live in Wawasi, but continues to be a member because he lived there with a relative when the association came into being. In much the same manner, the rules have been stretched to include other members not living in Wawasi, but who, for one reason or another, are

closely related with the affairs of the association. So far, the majority of Dagara living in Wawasi have joined the association, as its young secretary Alfred G. proudly claims. However, this statement needs to be qualified. Although the name ‘Dagaaba Family Group’ is intended to emphasize the idea that all Dagara form one big family and deliberately aims at avoiding cleavages between the different Dagara dialect groups, all members come from the area around Nandom and Ko with the single exception of Walter Y. who originates from Lawra. Thus the smooth and harmonious functioning of the group which the members constantly underlined and attributed to ethnic solidarity more correctly seems to be the result of the close regional links which are reinforced by numerous ties of kinship and of the fact that residence in Wawasi limits membership to the upper strata of the workforce.

Two controversies shed further light on the strategies of the association to avoid conflict and disunion. The first debate arose over the question of whether the constitutional objective to ‘settle misunderstandings that might exist among members’ should be read as meaning that marital problems should be discussed in group meetings. Interestingly the initiative was raised by one of the female members, but it was vehemently argued against by the majority. Although subsequently a committee was set up to deal with these problems ‘secretely, if the affected persons wish’, the majority decided that ‘family matters should not interfere in matters concerning the association’. As Alfred G. explained, ‘if I have my wife and we happen to have a quarrel [...] and my wife has relatives within this group, and if her clan are more than my clan, and they are also brought here, then this alone can bring down the association’. Clearly, it is the democratic structure of the association, the horizontal ties of solidarity and conflict that prevent the group from assuming the function of peacemaker. This holds particularly true of intrafamily issues, which came and in theory still come within the sphere of chiefly jurisdiction.

The second controversy was also connected with the problem of equality among members. When the monthly contributions of C 200 per male and C 100 per female member had accumulated to an amount worth saving in the bank, some members suggested that instead of cashing meagre bank interests, the money should be invested into a pito brewing scheme. The women in the association would be entrusted some capital for their brewing activities and return most of the profits in order to enhance the group’s capital and thus allow for larger amounts of money being borrowed interest-free to troubled members. Feelings ran high during the controversial discussion because it was clear

49. Interview with Alfred G., see fn. 46.
that only some women had the necessary equipment to brew regularly and because there were fears that money might be embezzled or misused by inefficient brewers. Eventually, for the first time in the history of the group, a formal vote concluded the debate: the brewing scheme should be suspended for another three years until the group was more consolidated.

This cautious attitude can be partly explained by the painful experiences of embezzlement of funds and internal cleavages which the Nandom Youth and Development Association (NYDA) of Obuasi was experiencing during the period when the much smaller Wawasi group was formed. It was indeed in direct response to the prolonged crisis of NYDA as well as the gradual decline of chiefly authority that the Wawasi association was formed. As Walter Y. sees it:

50. Interview with Walter Y., see fn. 47.

In fact it was when we realized that Obuasi was no more as it used to be that the idea of an association came to us. [...] [The chief] used to help. He used to call the people to a meeting at his house and discuss the problem with them so they could all find a solution to it. [...] Now it is no more the case. [...] These days nobody cares about the other. So even if I know I am rich and you call me to your house for a meeting, I will not come. Even if you are the chief and I know that I am richer than you and you call me to a meeting at your house, I won't come. I will rather expect you to come to my house. That is why things have changed. [...] So we found it necessary for us to come together and make some monthly contributions so that when a member is in difficulty we could loan this amount to him and give him some time to pay back. Otherwise, there are times when the individual will be in difficulty and will not readily have the money to help himself. For instance, these days a lot of people are arrested and put in cells. If a member of the group is put in cell, the group could use some of the money to bail him and the person will repay the money. So it was because of things of this sort that we formed the association.

Whereas Walter focusses on practical solidarity, Naamwin-ire D., Walter's foreman colleague at AGC and neighbour in the compound, rather emphasizes aspects of sociability in the activities of the association:

'This our meeting, it is the need to be together and be happy that we formed the group. We want that at the end of every year during Christmas, then we and our wives and children will sit together and rejoice that we have been able to go through the year successfully'.

And indeed, a review of the minutes of the monthly meetings reveals that, from about August 1987 through December and even well into February of the following year, the preparation of the 'end-of-the-year get-together' and its evaluation was the central issue that took up most of the association's discussions. The only other topic of note receiving

similar attention was the collecting of monthly dues and the question of how to deal with tardy contributors. A mere C 1000 of the C 45,300 membership dues collected in 1987 were actually given as funeral donations to two of the members, or in other words, spent on those aspects of mutual help that had been stressed by Walter. The same reservation holds true of the borrowing of money which had been meticulously prescribed in a number of sessions: during the past two years, virtually no member had requested to take advantage of the savings of the association. By contrast, a proud C 18,020 went into the elaboration of the lavish end-of-the-year party, an event which not only inspired the members but also persuaded secretary Alfred G. 'that with this one alone, we have given light to the outsiders, and within our families, we have assumed some kind of unity'.

In the final analysis, it seems that in spite of the frequent invocation of mutual assistance—lending money to distressed members, bailing them out of jail and funeral donation—as the main purpose of the association, it is rather the constant reassurance of the very existence of the group that shapes the meetings. Many activities of the Family Group can be interpreted as a proud reformulation of traditional solidarity and sociability in a 'modern' form. The fact, for instance, that most members have known each other long before joining a common organization, and that they are often linked to each other through kinship or membership in the same patri-clan is probably crucial to the functioning of the group. While kinship is completely understated towards outsiders, equality among members, as well as strictly 'impersonal' criteria of affiliation such as residence and ethnicity are emphasized.

The transition to modern forms of association is also reflected in the importance the group attaches to literacy as, for instance, a written constitution and written reminders to tardy contributors illustrate. Similar principles of modernization can be seen at work in the organization of monthly meetings. These consist of two parts. In the first highly formalized part, an opening prayer is followed by the reading out 'to the house' of the agenda previously drawn up by the executive and of the minutes that were meticulously recorded by the secretary. What is also interesting here is the way in which the association makes full use of a wide range of posts, ranging from Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Treasurer to Financial Secretary, Organizing Secretary and an Entertainment Committee. In the end, more than half of the members are office-bearers, and hence prestige can be accumulated without violating the principles of equality. The agenda closed, the participants proceed to informal conversations and pito drinking which make up the second part of the monthly gathering and which are

52. Interview with Alfred G., see fn. 46.
not quite unlike most spontaneous get-togethers of Dagara in a beer bar. The development of the Dagaaba Family Group in Wawasi and parallel organizations in other parts of Obuasi and in Tarkwa can be interpreted as an attempt to fill the vacuum created by the decline of the chieftaincy. Much of this is achieved by building on and by formalizing existing links of kinship and friendship. But what at first sight may appear only as a modernization of traditional social relationships, is potentially an element of the expansion of social networks and of the formation of an urban, however temporary Dagara community, not based on traditional allegiances alone.

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Clearly, the experiences of John N., Lambert D., Chief Kweku, the members of the Dagaaba Family Group and many other Dagara miners are not narratives about proletarianization, urbanization and cultural assimilation. For neither of these migrants work in the mine meant a total commitment to wage labour nor did the fact of ten or more years of residence in Tarkwa or Obuasi imply a complete severance of links to the home areas. Their life histories and life projects at every stage included a variety of options such as wage labour in industries or on farms in the South, petty trading and independent farming in the North that would enable them to cope with economic insecurity as well as to further accumulation in times of prosperity. Geographical and occupational diversification seem to be the main strategy used to minimize the risks inherent in overt economic specialization. Probably the most crucial factor for the viability of this diversification is a certain division of economic activities within segments of the wider family. Thus, in all biographies it was evident that there was at least one brother of the interviewees who worked on the farm in the North and thereby ‘kept the home fires burning’. Conversely, almost every family in Dagaraland has a relative in the South who can be called upon for monetary remittances and as a springboard for a career outside the village. There seems to be no one-way flow in these intrafamily arrangements but a great deal of mobility and flexibility in both directions.

This flexibility not only applies to the family economy but also characterizes the diversification of Dagara miners’ forms of collective organization. Thus, the focus in this paper on ethnic organizations should not gloss over the fact that the migrants also engage themselves in the union as well as other multi-ethnic associations. Thomas D., for instance, in the course of his life has been active simultaneously in the union, the Committee of the Defense of the Revolution, the Catholic Christian Fathers and Mothers Association, the local congregation of the
Church of Christ and the executive of the Nandom Youth and Development Association. Ultimately, much like in family networks the aim of such organizational diversification seems to be the proliferation of resources.

At the very least, the life stories and the light they shed on individual and collective strategies of survival and accumulation suggest that the diversification of sources of income, the persistence of home ties and the construction of ethnic organizations do not develop as a mere reaction to external economic pressures. Rather, they indicate that even long-term migration to the mines forms part of broader projects beyond proletarianization.

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