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THE DYNAMICS OF FIELDWORK AMONG THE TALENSI: MEYER FORTES IN NORTHERN GHANA, 1934–7

John Parker

Meyer Fortes (1906–83) was a leading figure in the anthropology of Africa in the mid-twentieth century. After graduating from the University of Cape Town in his native South Africa in 1926, Fortes moved to London to study for a PhD in psychology. In 1931, he came under the influence of Charles Seligman and Bronislaw Malinowski and began to channel his concern with child psychology into the emerging field of social anthropology. Since his arrival at the London School of Economics in 1923, Malinowski had championed a new theory and method of what he called 'functionalist' anthropology, based not on the sweeping historical hypotheses on the evolution of human culture that hitherto had dominated the discipline but on the intensive study of a particular tribal people along the lines of his own earlier fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia. The support of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (later the IAI), coupled with financial backing from the Rockefeller Foundation, enabled Malinowski to launch an active research programme and by the early 1930s he was dispersing his growing band of acolytes to various corners of the colonial world. When in 1932 Fortes was awarded a fellowship for a proposed study of the social development of the African child, he settled upon the remote northern frontier of the British colony of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) as a site for research. From 1934 to 1935 and again from 1936 to 1937, Fortes and his wife Sonia lived among the Talensi (or, in his spelling, Tallensi), one of the many non-centralized agricultural peoples occupying the savanna country of the Volta River Basin stretching from the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast north into French-ruled Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). The result was Fortes's famous monographs, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (1945) and *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1949), numerous related articles and subsequent theoretical extrapolations, which together form one of the largest bodies of work on any one people in the annals of twentieth-century anthropological research.[1]

This article examines the two years in which Meyer and Sonia Fortes worked among the Talensi. Its focus, to borrow Meyer's own phrasing, is the dynamics of ethnographic fieldwork – in particular the web of personal relations generated by their entry into a world struggling to come to terms with the forces of colonial change. The contours of that world are well enough known in outline. In 2005,

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[1]The pioneering generation of anthropologists of Africa has been badly served by biographers and Fortes is no exception. For a preliminary sketch, see Drucker-Brown 1989; for some self-reflection, see Fortes 1978; and for a useful collective study, Goody 1995. Compare Young 2004.

Jean Allman and I published *Tongnaab*, an attempt to reconstruct the twentieth-century history of the Talensi ancestor-deity as its cult spread from its established savanna heartland through the Akan forest and the towns of the Gold Coast to the south (Allman and Parker 2005; see also Parker 2011). Meyer Fortes, we argued, played a role in that story that went beyond the production of ethnographic knowledge. He inserted himself, 'whether intentionally or not, into the historical narratives flowing in and around the Tong Hills', authoring not only his account of Talensi social structure but also, in many ways, 'the terms of colonial control for the Tong Hills in the 1930s' (Allman and Parker 2005: 183). Fortes's published corpus, the colonial archive and interviews conducted with elderly Talensi and other Ghanaians provided much evidence for this analysis. It was formulated, however, without the benefit of access to Fortes's field notes, diaries, correspondence and other unpublished papers. This material has recently been deposited in the Cambridge University Library where, although only partially catalogued, it is now available for consultation. It includes the principal sources for this article: Meyer's diaries and field notebooks, supplemented by those of Sonia. The latter are themselves a rich historical source: the Russian-born Sonia was also a trained ethnographer and a keen and pithy observer of local society.[2] If Fortes's published work on the Talensi represents one of the great bodies of ethnographic knowledge on an African people, then this voluminous unpublished corpus provides rare insight into the quotidian world of a colonial-era ethnographer, his interlocutors and his subjects at a key moment in local history.[3]

The aim is neither to critique Fortes's functionalist method of knowledge production nor further to reflect on the ways in which the ethnographic gaze 'makes its object' (Fabian 1983). Rather, it is to explore with greater nuance than previously has been possible the 'colonial situation' into which he and Sonia inserted themselves between 1934 and 1937. I am particularly interested in Meyer's observations of – and own relationship with – two dominant figures in the local political landscape: *Tongrana* Nambiong (d. 1941), the leading Talensi 'chief' and his host in Tongo, and *Golibdaana* Tengol (d. 1949), the arriviste ritual entrepreneur who came to control access on the part of pilgrims to the main oracular shrine atop the adjacent Tong Hills. The structural political rivalry between Nambiong and Tengol was examined in *Tongnaab*, but the personalities, motivations, fears and aspirations of these key historical actors emerge in far sharper focus from the pages of Fortes's papers. So too does the role of two other figures who passed almost completely under the radar of official

[2]The two co-authored only one article, however: Fortes and Fortes 1936.

[3]The accession number in the manuscript collection of the Cambridge University Library for the Fortes papers is Add. 8405. Only the correspondence, however, has been fully catalogued, so I have devised a citation system for the material used here, based on the Forteses' original numbering, as follows. Meyer's diaries (five volumes for 1934–5 and two volumes for 1936–7): MF Diary; Sonia's diaries (four volumes for 1934–5 and one volume for 1936–7): SF Diary; Meyer's field notebooks for 1934–5 (40 volumes): M1, M2, etc.; Sonia's field notebooks for 1934–5 (15 volumes): S1, S2, etc.; Meyer's field notebooks for 1936–7 (29 volumes): M1 (1936–), M2 (1936–7), etc. I have located only three field notebooks for Sonia from 1936–7, which are not cited here. Meyer also compiled a sequence of seven larger notebooks in 1936 labelled A to G: these are cited as MF Notebook A, etc. Also cited here are the journals by the Forteses' translator Anaho Bari, labelled on their inside front covers AN I, AN II, etc.; I have also located four field notebooks by Anaho, labelled A1, A2, A4 and A6.

documentation: Bassana Moshi, an ex-soldier and veteran of the colonial conquest of the region who had carved out a powerful position as the interpreter for the local British administration, and the Forteses' own original interpreter and informant, a young man named Anaho Bari who was one of the first literate Talensi. A consideration of both contributes to the growing understanding of the role of indigenous intermediaries, cultural brokers and other local agents of colonial rule in Africa and beyond (Lawrance *et al*. 2006; Osborn 2003). All four individuals can be seen to have been wrestling with complex and competing cultures of honour: the honour of the chief; of the wealthy but socially insecure 'new man'; of the old warrior; and of the young scholar and interlocutor with a new world of written knowledge (Iliffe 2005; Hawkins 2002).

A range of other issues in the history of the Talensi and of the expanding colonial world of which they were part are also illuminated by the Fortes papers.[4] Some of these were developed as themes in his published work: marriage and gender relations; child-rearing and family life; death and burial; the realm of religion and belief. Others, such as labour migration, the expanding flow of new commodities and the trans-regional ritual network focused on the Tongnaab shrines of the Tong Hills, emerge only in passing from the published corpus. Fortes tended to marginalize these processes as ephemeral 'culture contact' or as 'modern factors of disequilibrium', intruding into what he saw as the essential stability of the traditional tribal structure (Fortes 1936; 1945: 250–8).[5] Yet the diaries reveal that far from being marginal, such manifestations of the modern loomed just as large as older, more established elements in daily life for many Talensi. Indeed, the ethnographer himself became a factor of disequilibrium, yet another agent of culture contact that must be added to those examined in his first published paper on the Talensi. I touch here on two of these issues, in so far as they feature prominently in the political dynamics of the 1930s: changing patterns of marriage and increasing use of woven cloth and clothing (see too Allman 2004).

What these new sources do not reveal is much in the way of a deeper Talensi history. Fortes was generally uninterested in the past and in this respect there is less of a disjuncture between the published work and unpublished papers. An apparent lack of concern on the part of most Talensi with their own history, and their absorption in new forms of political competition generated by colonial rule inclined him to regard indigenous accounts of the past as vague, unreliable or out-and-out fabrication. Fortes's passing comment to his readers with regard to the fundamental division between the autochthonous Tale clans, on the one hand, and the so-called Namoo migrant clans, on the other, is typical: 'This cleavage is given a symbolic formulation in myths of origin the historicity of which need not concern us' (Fortes 1945: 27). Such 'myths', he was convinced, were also hopelessly distorted by political competition: 'each party aggrandises itself in its legends of origin – lying, of course, to impress the white man! The black man is least devoted to his own traditions, if they stand in the way of profit.'[6]

[4]On the potential of Fortes's papers as a source for the archaeological analysis of Talensi material culture, see Insoll 2010.

[5]For an analysis of certain manifestations of the supernatural realm also marginalized by Fortes, see Parker 2006.

[6]MF Diary 1936 Vol. 1, 27 July 1936, 217.

Yet even when interacting with elderly informants who did have keen memories, a historical sensibility and no particular axe to grind, when the past came up in conversation Fortes tended either to change the subject back to the present or to neglect the recording of relevant details. Take this account of a visit to his friend Tiezien, the *kpatarnaaba* or head of the Kpatar clan of Tengzug, the community occupying the central valley of the Tong Hills:

> The more I see of Tiezien the more I like him. He is 'genuine' not nasaara tainted. . . . The past is very much alive and vivid to him. He launches easily . . . into tales of the past – the one great fight he saw as a young man, the deeds and acts of this man and that. He has an attractive personality – something simple and frank about him. . . . He goes anywhere and everywhere – not like the Tongrana, a social personality completely defined by his 'naam'.[7]

Much interesting detail on the configuration of the Kpatar clan follows. But of Tiezien's tales of the past, Fortes records little. 'Stories told with children sitting about are what tribal history exists here', he noted elsewhere, '– the history of what living people of today remember.'[8]

Reading these pages as a historian, one can only regret that such tantalizing glimpses of the pre-colonial past surface so fleetingly. Yet the picture that emerges from the Forteses' papers adds hugely to our knowledge of lived experience in a remote corner of the West African savanna at the high point of colonial rule in the mid-1930s. In the spirit of the 'microhistory' pioneered by Carlo Ginzburg and others in the 1970s, they offer the possibility that the intimate quotidian workings of an obscure and out-of-the-way place might be reflective of broader historical dynamics. Like the Inquisition records with which Ginzburg famously reconstructed the cosmos of his sixteenth-century miller Menocchio, Fortes's papers are of course those of an outsider looking in, with his own particular predilections, prejudices and silences (Ginzburg 1980; for a recent reflection, see Ginzburg 2012). If they do not quite provide enough insight to reconstruct an individual cosmos, they do offer a glimpse into a fluid world of political intrigue and uncertainty swirling underneath the enduring solidity of Talensi social structure.

ARRIVAL, EARLY 1934: ANAHO BARI AND BASSANA MOSHI

Meyer and Sonia Fortes arrived in Talensi country at a time of transition for local communities and for the structure of British rule in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Colonial conquest had come late to the frontiers of the protectorate and in the early 1930s the state remained rudimentary. It was only in 1911, thirteen years after the European partition of the Volta Basin savannas, that the Tong Hills were subdued by a military campaign and its recalcitrant inhabitants exiled to the surrounding plains. The outbreak of the First World War

[7] *Ibid.*, 10 July 1936, 179; see too M4 (1936–7) 'July 1936 Kpatar'. *Nasaara*: European (derived from the Arabic 'Nazarene', Christian); *naam*: political office or chieftaincy (as in *naaba*, 'chief').
[8] MF Diary 1936 Vol. 1, 11 June 1936, 131.

three years later, however, served to undermine newly established British control. The withdrawal of colonial troops caused widespread unrest and it was not until the 1920s that the administration considered the Talensi and the other so-called Frafra peoples of the Zuarungu District as finally 'settled'. Compulsory communal labour (*nasaara toma*) was mobilized by British-appointed headmen or *kambonaaba*s, while the expansion of the cocoa and mining economies in the Akan forests and the construction of a motor road to the south served to draw increasing numbers of young men – and some women – into migrant labour in the Gold Coast (Allman and Parker 2005: 54–105, *passim*). Yet no sooner had the era of conquest and pacification been replaced by more settled rule than the onset of global depression presented a further setback for the colonial project – in as far as the shoestring holding operation on the Northern Territories frontier can be called a 'project'. In the face of declining revenues, retrenchment of personnel and a growing awareness of the limited capacity of colonial rule to effect change in such remote African societies, the administration sought to move from the *ad hoc* systems of rule of the past to apply in practice the ideology of indirect rule through indigenous authorities. The problem was, however, to identify legitimate indigenous authorities in what, in British eyes, were primitive tribal societies.

Indeed, it was the very isolation and perceived robust primitiveness of the stateless peoples of the northern frontier that drew Meyer Fortes to the Zuarungu District in the first place. Arriving in the Gold Coast's capital Accra in January 1934, he and Sonia proceeded to motor the four hundred miles north through the Akan forest, across the Volta River into the open grasslands of the kingdom of Dagbon and on to the headquarters of the densely populated Zuarungu District. Despite the fact that depression-era retrenchment meant that the Zuarungu station was no longer manned by a permanent administrative officer, however, Fortes found that the proximity of colonial power had rendered the local Nankani people less than conducive to ethnographic observation. As he later reported to Malinowski, 'the natives have a fixed idea that all white men are government officials. . . . They were friendly but not very forthcoming.'[9] On the advice of District Commissioner Gibbs, the Forteses relocated some five miles south to neighbouring Talensi country, occupying a rebuilt government rest house in the settlement of Tongo at the foot of the Tong Hills.

Their diaries and notebooks are revealing of the process by which Meyer and Sonia began tentatively to feel their way into local society. Having had no language training, they were dependent on the services of translators, at first on various members of their household and then on one individual in particular: Anaho Bari. Anaho (in typical colonial manner, his 'surname' was that of his native settlement, Bari) goes unnamed in Fortes's published work: in his earliest Talensi paper he refers in passing to an assistant who was 'the only literate member of the tribe at home' and in *The Dynamics of Clanship* to a 'semi-literate interpreter' (Fortes 1936: 43; Fortes 1945: xii). Born around 1915, Anaho was the scion of an influential family from the autochthonous settlement of Bari, who at the age of twelve was sent away to school in Tamale, the headquarters of the

[9]Royal Anthropological Institute, London, MS 298.1, 'First Report of Field Work', by Meyer Fortes, July 1934.

Northern Territories a hundred miles to the south in Dagbon.[10] 'One fine morning of dry season the DC sent a message to my uncle the chief of Bari to come to Zuaragu [*sic*], and when we went, the DC told him that every chief may sent [*sic*] one boy each to school', Anaho wrote. 'I went to school with other Talansi [*sic*] boys . . . from three towns – Tongo, Tengzugu and Datoko, one Nankani boy and one Namnam boy, but all of them run away in a few weeks and left me and the Namnam boy.'[11] Anaho remained at the government school at Tamale for seven years, and his linguistic skills were sound enough for him to have been lined up for a position as a court translator for District Commissioner Gibbs before being seconded to the Forteses.

The Forteses were heavily reliant upon Anaho Bari in their early months in the field. Anaho was set to work producing a series of journals in which he was asked to write up, at first in Talen but later sometimes in English, a mixture of day-to-day events, ethnographic observations and incidents from his own life. The journals indicate that he would then guide the Forteses through the text and provide translation, with Sonia taking the lead in recording the translated texts. Yet Fortes was worried by the impact on Anaho of the very education that had enabled this transmission of knowledge. His concern was with the potentially damaging impact of 'culture contact', the term in vogue in colonial circles in the 1930s to describe 'the effects of the contact between African societies and European civilization' (Fortes 1936: 24). (Indeed, gauging the impact of culture contact was the central concern of those bodies funding Fortes and Malinowski's other fieldworkers, the IAI and the Rockefeller Foundation.) These anxieties are captured in a diary entry on another early interlocutor, one Naba, which also underlines the importance of migration and clothing as markers – and drivers – of social change:

> We have . . . picked up an interpreter-teacher-informant-to-be, in the shape of an ex-steward boy who has been in Kumasi and on the coast, speaks good pidgin, and has now returned to his paternal compound. This Naba and his sisters have become part of the ménage. The latter two are distinguished among girls of the neighbourhood by the fact that they wear some sort of clothes. One . . . has been to the coast, her husband being a steward boy at Sekondi. Naba has brought clothes home for them, he says. At first impression Naba seems strangely uncontaminated with European ideas, though he wears steward-boy clothes. . . . But he has developed a sense of 'respectability' – he definitely thinks it superior of his sisters to wear clothes.[12]

Fortes also found the nineteen-year-old schoolboy Anaho difficult: 'He has considerable self-will, demands things and when refused simply continues to demand.'[13] An interesting dispute arose over Anaho's journal writing. 'Thus, he wishes to write in ink – demands – we refused, telling him I would give it to him later when he had more practice in writing. He stands about half sulking,

[10]For Anaho's written account of his family, see ANI Vol. 1, 'My grandfather Nakuoh', 9 July 1934, 95.

[11]*Ibid.*, 23 March 1934, 14–16. The entry is written in Talen with interposed translation by Sonia Fortes.

[12]MF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 31 January 1934, 45.

[13]*Ibid.*, 13 February 1934, 64–5.

half grinning, demanding why I will not give him the ink. Do I think he will cheat me with it [?].'[14] 'Servant palavers still abound,' Fortes noted a month later.

> Anaho, who is a very suspicious paranoidal devil says the Tongo people don't like him to do the job he is doing. They want to pick quarrels by saying he is incompetent. I had to make an example of a man from Yindur, leader of the Gologo troupe, who . . . said that Anaho did not hear him properly. I threw him out . . . . Anaho is full of such palavers. . . . He doesn't want to do two jobs, interpreting and writing. He would like to be like Bassana – interpreter only, or a clerk only.[15]

These comments are somewhat surprising coming from a child psychologist. In early 1934, of course, Fortes was still largely unaware of the ferociously patriarchal nature of local society, of the impact of his and Sonia's appearance at Tongo, and of how both might shape the anxieties of a young man entering into the strange, uncertain world of intimate intercourse with Europeans. 'If he is of no other use,' Fortes had earlier written of Anaho, 'he will be an interesting psychological study in culture contact.'[16]

Anaho's desire to fashion the terms of his role as an intermediary with Europeans 'like Bassana' is unsurprising. Bassana Moshi was a recognized power in the land: a one-man 'circle of iron' around the rudimentary colonial apparatus who over the decades had come to broker all manner of exchanges between the British and local society (cf. Osborn 2003). A residue of the era of colonial conquest, Bassana's power rested in part on his status as an outsider: as his name suggests, he originated from the Mossi kingdom across the frontier in French Upper Volta. An ex-cavalryman who claimed to have fought for the Mande empire-builder Samori Touré in the 1890s before joining the so-called Moshi Horse detachment of the West African Frontier Force, he rose to the rank of sergeant-major, took part in various punitive expeditions against the Frafra and by about 1913 was ensconced as the district commissioner's official translator.[17] That at least was the face he presented to his local charges, his identity as a Muslim Mossi warrior underlined by his horse and sumptuous woven gowns. Bassana's origins, however, appear to have been more complex, as Sonia noted:

> Bassana is . . . apparently the local aristocracy. Everyone calls him 'salmeja' – sergeant-major – one of his sons was a policeman at Accra – has been transferred to Zuarangu – another of his sons is a carpenter trained on the coast. He regards himself as the DC's deputy. . . . According to Isaka [one of the Forteses' servants, and a Muslim] he is not a proper Moshi. . . . His father he says was a Grunshi and his mother a Moshi. . . He says Bassana prays small small as [a] Moham[medan]. But he is not one.[18]

[14] *Ibid.* Thus, the instrument and substance of the written word itself becomes a factor in the struggle over the production of these extraordinary documents.

[15] *Ibid.*, 12 March 1934, 111. 'Gologo troupe': the dancers at the annual Gologo festival, then under way in the Tong Hills.

[16] *Ibid.*, 8 February 1934, 59.

[17] See National Archives of Ghana, Accra [hereafter NAG] ADM 56/1/207 Tong Hills Affairs, Enquiry into the Alleged Reopening of the Tong Hill Fetish, 26–7 December 1920, evidence of Billa [i.e. Bassana] Moshi, Court Interpreter.

[18] SF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 1 March 1934, 89.

Bassana's humble background as a 'Grunshi' (or Gurunsi) – a generic and often pejorative term for the tribes inhabiting the frontiers between the Mossi-Dagomba states – was confirmed by the district commissioner, A. F. Kerr, who recalled that he had been sold into slavery in the Mossi kingdom before escaping to join Samori's army (Anafu 1973: 22). Despite this crack in his facade, he was a tough and shrewd operator who 'as the DC's factotum supervises everything', manipulating the flow of information and access to the administration.[19] 'He interprets . . . with the skill and self possession of an old hand,' Meyer observed. 'But I am quite sure that his versions are summaries of salient points, not of details. Alas, he has been court interpreter here and has acquired a legal faculty for terseness.'[20]

Like similar indigenous power brokers on remote frontiers who represented the lower echelon of the colonial state, Bassana's methods were a combination of coercion and the careful construction of local alliances. Back in 1915, he had overseen the destruction of the Tongnaab shrine mistakenly identified by the British as the one 'great fetish' of the Tong Hills, recounting 'the tale with such gusto and in perfectly cold blood,' Fortes recorded, that 'no wonder he is held in holy awe by the Tenzugdem'.[21] Put in charge of rebuilding the rest house at Tongo for the new arrivals, Bassana made his coercive presence felt immediately: 'When he came there one morning he found not a soul at the place. He got on his horse and went around gathering the *kambonabas*. "I flogged them and made them collect the people to work".'[22] His alliance building was largely pursued through marriage. 'If you don't give Bassana something your case would never reach the DC,' one of Fortes's informants complained, and tribute flowed into his household in the form of both produce and young women.[23] In a telling nod to European sensibilities, Bassana maintained to Gibbs that he had only the one wife, although it was common knowledge among the Talensi that he had at least forty. One indication of his success is his almost complete absence from colonial records. In contrast to the similar figures studied by Osborn in early colonial French Soudan (now Mali), who burst onto the documentary record when their corrupt and extortionate practices were uncovered – and then terminated – by their European superiors, Bassana seems to have been highly skilled at keeping his nose clean enough to maintain his status for decades.[24]

[19]MF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 31 January 1934, 44.
[20]*Ibid.*
[21]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 26 December 1934, 118. Tenzugdem: the people of Tengzug.
[22]SF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 28 February 1934, 74.
[23]MF Diary, 1934 Vol. 2, 6 September 1934, 168.
[24]Aside from the testimony cited in note 17 above, the only other official record of Bassana that could be located was an account of an incident in 1918, when he shot and wounded a wanted suspect in a so-called 'bow and arrow palaver': NAG AMD 56/1/230 Zouragu District Native Affairs, A. W. Cardinall, acting DC, to Commissioner of the North Eastern Province, 7 May 1918.

THE *TONGRANA* AND THE *GOLIBDAANA*

Meyer and Sonia's arrival at Tongo caused quite a stir. 'We were the only white people who had ever lived among the Tallensi for any length of time,' Meyer observed, 'and the first to speak their language' (Fortes 1945: xii). Despite the proximity of the Zuarungu station – the sole European resident of which was an agricultural officer, C. W. Lynn – for the Talensi, direct encounter with British officers was rare and something, by and large, to be avoided. For most, it is likely that the ubiquitous Bassana Moshi *was* the colonial state or, as it was called, *nasaara naam*. As the Forteses began to scrutinize local society, local society, therefore, began to scrutinize them. Installed by Gibbs and Bassana in the rest house at the foot of the Tong Hills, they found themselves under the watchful eye of the ranking secular office holder, *Tongrana* Nambiong. Unlike the *kambonaabas*, 'chiefs' created by colonial fiat in the 1910s, the office of *tongrana* was an established institution that served to link the Namoo clans to their remembered origins in the neighbouring Mamprusi kingdom of Mamprugu. After a period of some years in which Nambiong (then known by his given name, Kpama) had served as an interlocutor with the British on behalf of his elderly father, he officially became *tongrana* in 1918 and had secured a reputation with the British as trustworthy and effective. The Forteses, however, found him reserved and distant at first. 'It is not easy to converse with the chief,' Meyer noted. 'I don't feel at ease when I am cross examining him – he has a whimsical, half sardonic smile which breaks out when curious questions are asked. We talked at random and scrappily, coming from the clouds and prospect of rain to astronomy.'[25] Sonia concurred. 'I never like talking to the chief. Though he is quite willing, the conversation is never spontaneous. . . . I can't understand his behaviour. He does not bother to greet us with any show of respect.'[26]

Nambiong's cautious, elliptical manner stood in contrast to that of his rival, *Golibdaana* Tengol. In contrast to the essentially secular office of *tongrana*, that of *golibdaana* had a ritual function and was associated not with the Namoo migrants but with the autochthonous Tale clans of the Tong Hills. Long before Tengol was *golibdaana*, however, he had been made a *kambonaaba* – appointed by the region's first district commissioner in the aftermath of the conquest of 1911 to be in charge of the exiled hill-folk. A forceful and ambitious figure, Tengol had parlayed this role into a position of great wealth, inserting himself in the 1920s as the key intermediary in a new phenomenon – the movement of pilgrims from the southern parts of the Gold Coast to the oracle shrines of the Tong Hills. In 1931, he persuaded the British authorities to allow him and his immediate associates to return to their homes atop the hills in Tengzug, from where he was able further to consolidate his control of the expanding and highly lucrative pilgrim trade to the Tongnaab shrine under his managment. Yet, for all this, Tengol was regarded by Nambiong and his allies as a flashy upstart – envied for his material wealth, sumptuous clothing and huge number of wives, but despised for his pretensions to chieftaincy and his entrepreneurial marketing of ritual resources.

[25]MF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 25 March 1934, 132.
[26]SF Diary 1934 Vol. 2, 9 May 1934, 67.

Unlike the aloof Nambiong, Tengol actively sought out the Forteses from the first, displaying his not inconsiderable political skills and proven facility in dealing with 'strangers'. His charm offensive was helped by the fact that the first major ethnographic event of their fieldwork was the annual Gologo festival, an exhilarating sequence of rituals and dances performed in the dramatic rocky setting of Tengzug over which the *golibdaana* presided. Sonia's diary captures the excitement of the scene, as well as providing further evidence for the circulation and display of new commodities:

> In the afternoon we went to Tenzug [*sic*] to see the Gologo dances. . . . It was like a black ocean. There were perhaps 10,000 people collected. . . . We saw decorated women and men walk past – they were coming from Bari and Tongo. They looked magnificent in their heavy twisted bead necklaces. . . . Stockings were much in evidence, some had sandshoes and one fellow even carried a pair of European boots which I saw him put on just before he reached the spot. . . . [O]ne fellow was wearing white and brown ladies shoes! Cheap Turkish towels were much in display. Practically every dancer had one slung across his shoulder and by Jove they need them.[27]

Sonia then records their encounter with Tengol and his senior wife:

> I saw the Chief and some of his attendants. . . . Suddenly I saw a determined looking woman – very decorated – haranguing the crowd. I scarcely managed to enquire from Anaho who she was . . . when she grabbed me . . . and carried me off . . . . The crowd opened before us. . . . She walked like a general, waving her horse swish. . . . She took me to a rock to see the crowd and dancing. . . . The Chief is a most impressive looking old fellow. . . . He walked with his arm around Meyer's shoulder while his wife leaned heavily on my shoulder.[28]

Tengol sought to project his wealth and power through the accumulation and display of two key commodities: wives and cloth. In a largely subsistence agricultural economy where, despite the advent of migrant labour, there remained limited capacity for social differentiation, the ability of a few individuals to generate great wealth by tapping into the increasing commodity flows of the wider colonial economy was a striking phenomenon. Historically, a man's wealth and status was gauged by the number of his wives, whose reproductive capacity in turn expanded his household and underpinned food production. It is unsurprising that Tengol's senior wife (or *po'akpeem*) had all the bearing of a general, as at the time he had some eighty wives – and she would have been in charge of all of them (Allman and Parker 2005: 210; on wives and marriage, see too Fortes 1949: 78–134, *passim*). Most Talensi men in the 1930s had one or two; an especially successful individual might have up to half a dozen. The *tongrana* had about thirty, including a number that he, like Bassana, had been given by Tengol. Indeed, a prominent aspect of Gologo was the improvised performance by the dance groups of topical and often scurrilous songs, and Fortes would later note one song lamenting 'the sorry plight of the young men who could get no wives

[27] SF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 1 March 1934, 103.
[28] *Ibid.*, 106.

because the chiefs were greedily snapping up all the young women' (Fortes 1987: 51).[29]

If the extraordinary accumulation of wives by Tengol was viewed with a mixture of admiration, envy and disdain, then so too was the *golibdaana*'s flamboyant display of wealth and political power in the form of cloth. The colonial-era transformation in cultures of clothing, bodily decoration and comportment must be located in a broader history of interaction between states and stateless peoples in the savannas of the Volta Basin, one in which the ruling elites of the former regarded the latter as unclothed or 'naked' and that perceived nakedness to be a fundamental indicator of their primitiveness (Goody and Goody 1996; Allman and Parker 2005: 61–2; Allman 2004). Neither was this an uncontested reading of relative degrees of civilization. For their part, the Talensi attitude to woven cloth was historically one of ambivalence: sought after as a desired commodity (mainly from Mossi country to the north), but also symbolic of outsiders and their predatory violence. The latter was enshrined in the strict prohibition on the wearing of cloth by *tengdaana*s or 'earth priests' (who on assuming office wore only animal skins) and by everybody in the vicinity of the most important earth and ancestor shrines and at particular points in the ritual cycle. Sonia's comment on the use of imported Turkish towels at Gologo reflects this prohibition, as towels were appropriated into local culture as a form of 'skin' rather than cloth – and their use as such remains ubiquitous today. In terms of the cleavage in Talensi society between the Namoo migrants and the autochthonous Tale, this distinction played out in the fact that for Namoo office holders such as the *tongrana*, it was the wearing of 'Mossi-style' robes (*kparih*) and a red fez (*mung*) that most clearly signified their status as representatives of Mamprusi chiefly power. For the ritual office holders of the Tale, in contrast, animal skin rather than cloth was deemed to be the appropriate form of attire.

Yet, by the interwar period, the desire for woven cloth and new forms of clothing, especially on the part of young men and women, was very great. Indeed, the changing dynamics of marriage, migration and consumerism were thoroughly entangled, as Sonia discovered from a conversation with one Siga, an ex-soldier. 'Everybody here wants to go to taste town life but they don't know how bad it is there,' Siga explained.

> They want to go because they want the white man's money so that they can get clothes. . . . The women, too, all clamour after the town, where they can get fine things. Three of his wives ran away from him, all following soldiers to the towns. Two are still at Kumasi. . . . Even though Siga's story may not be quite true, the young women certainly like to follow a man to the towns where they can get all the much-coveted clothes and headkerchiefs. . . . On a special occasion like a dance or a funeral, or even market day, the number of cloths seen is quite astonishing.[30]

For the older generation, this was worrying on a number of scores. 'The attitude of Gbizugdem to "cloth" is extraordinary,' Meyer wrote. 'Said the Tendaana with very great solemnity . . . : Any kind of cloth may not be put on my body

[29]On the 1934 Gologo (or Golib), see also M3 'Golib'.
[30]SF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 31 January 1935, 162–3.

at all. . . . There is no question of the *horror* . . . with which he refers to this taboo. It is far from a mechanical observance, it has a great emotional charge.'[31] 'Look at all those young boys who went to Kumasi and learnt to wear gowns there,' another elder added, '– they all died.'[32] Like Siga's story, this may not be quite true, but it captures the role of clothing in processes of social change – and the unease that these processes could generate.

The *golibdaana*'s ostentatious dress sense, then, was part of a broader historical dynamic. Yet as a key element of his strategy to project the image of a chief, it also had particular political significance. A few weeks after the Gologo festival, Tengol passed through Tongo on horseback on his way to Zuarungu to greet the visiting *nayiri*, the paramount chief of Mamprugu. With drums beating, he and his horse both gorgeously attired and shaded by an enormous Asante-style umbrella, he looked, Sonia noted, 'a most picturesque and regal figure'.[33] While Meyer and Sonia agreed that they found the *tongrana* difficult, however, their response to Tengol differed. Soon discovering from informants at Tongo that Tengol was an 'upstart' whose power base and wealth rested mainly on 'Ashanti people who come to his fetish', Meyer frowned upon such an obvious and seemingly illegitimate manifestation of culture contact.[34] What Sonia described as a regal bearing, he dismissed as 'gaudy'. A year later, by which time Meyer had swung firmly behind the *tongrana*, Sonia still remained impressed by Tengol's dignified bearing, powerful presence and careful manners. 'We were received by the Gologdana [*sic*] and taken into his "room" which . . . looks like an old clothes shop,' she wrote of a visit to Tengzug.

> All his gowns and cloths, saddles and prized possessions, such as a hurricane lamp or primus stove . . . are kept there. The cloths and gowns are hanging on the wall partitioning up the room. . . . [which] is always full of strangers – 2 Ashantis were there, Dagombas and so on. . . . The Gologdana was the perfect host. He is a very genial fellow and really very generous; he also is physically more vigorous then the Tongrana which makes his company pleasanter. Also his behaviour was pleasanter. I do not recollect a single occasion when the Tongrana produced a seat for us, though he himself would . . . sit on his cushion or skin. The Gologdana on the other hand at once offered me his Ashanti chair and spread a cushion for Meyer before he himself took his seat.[35]

'It is interesting to speculate,' Meyer later reflected, 'to what extent the daily presence of Dagombas and the open contact with the world of *clothed* people, the access to a steady market for clothes, and . . . his relations with white men as a chief created and maintained by *Nasaara kpiong* has rendered the Golibdana more accessible to white influence.'[36]

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[31]MF Diary 1936 Vol. 2, 19 September 1936, 24. Gbizugdem: the people of Gbizug, a Talensi community adjacent to Tongo. On the forcible dressing of a *tengdaana* in cloth by British officers in an attempt to destroy faith in the Tongnaab 'fetish', see Allman and Parker 2005: 75–8.

[32]MF Diary 1936 Vol. 2, 19 September 1936, 24.

[33]S1, 16 March 1934, 76–7.

[34]MF Diary 1934 Vol. 1, 16 March 1934, 112.

[35]SF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 4, 19 February 1935, 3–4.

[36]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 4, 29 March 1935, 38. Emphasis in original.

NASAARA NAAM AND THE RITUAL REALM

Throughout 1934, Meyer and Sonia threw themselves into the routine of fieldwork at Tongo. Fortes soon abandoned his original plan to focus on child psychology, replacing it with a broader examination of Talensi social structure. They were aware of the simmering rivalry between the *tongrana* and the *golibdaana* and knew that this was connected to 'culture contact' in the form of colonial rule and the flow of pilgrims to the Tongnaab shrine up in Tengzug – but only vaguely so, as this seemed ephemeral and aberrant compared to the intricate social mechanisms of kin and clan. There is no indication that they had more than fleeting contact with British officialdom – which suited Meyer down to the ground. For the Forteses too, Bassana Moshi was the principal local agent of colonial power, *nasaara naam*. Yet by the end of the year, major changes were afoot. The terms of *nasaara naam* were about to shift, as the administration moved to introduce a rationalized system of indirect rule. A new chief commissioner with a track record of collaborating with progressive indigenous chieftaincy in the Gold Coast Colony, W. J. A. Jones, was appointed for the task, while the Zuarungu station was once more manned by a permanent officer, A. F. Kerr. Fortes had gone out of his way to base himself in a remote community as little affected as possible by culture contact, yet, suddenly, the demands of colonial rule threatened to have an impact both on him and on his subjects of study.

At the same time, Meyer's relationship with the *tongrana* began to change. Whether Nambiong sensed a threat to his position from the planned political reform and actively courted Fortes as an ally in uncertain times is unclear, but there is no doubt that their mutual wariness began to be replaced by a degree of intimacy and, ultimately, real affection. One factor may have been that Meyer's command of Talen was now sound enough to enable him to converse without interpretation from Anaho; by early 1935, long verbatim texts in the vernacular begin to appear in the notebooks and diaries. Having hitherto contained only passing and often frustrated references to Nambiong, the diaries are suddenly peppered with the records of long, relaxed conversations on a variety of topics. 'I visited the Chief a few days ago, at dusk, and found him sitting with a few of the young men who follow him', runs one early indication of this shift.

> We drifted into a conversation about 'souls' – *sii*. The Chief speaks like a man accustomed to be heard as an authority. He speaks with the voice of the people. Except for his firm belief in the parenthood of Adama and Awa, his views are absolutely those of everyone else – perhaps a shade more elaborately worked out than those of a lay man. His conviction about the prophetic value of dreams is as firm as that of Trook [i.e., Terook], though his personality is as essentially tough and extrovert as Trook's is tender and introvert.[37]

[37]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 24 September 1934, 11–12; see too M21, 10 October 1934, 65 and 71. Adama and Awa (the Arabic Hawa): Adam and Eve, as taught by the Catholic White Fathers Mission, based at nearby Bolgatanga since 1925; for the *tongrana*'s explanation of the White Fathers' eschatology, see MF Diary 1934 Vol. 2, 8 July 1934, 103. On Terook, a prominent *bakoldana* or soothsayer, see M21, 16 September 1934, 1.

Given his functionalist project to comprehend the bedrock of social organization, that Nambiong was an authentic man of the people was clearly important to Fortes. Yet beyond a generally shared worldview and standard cosmological notions, the *tongrana* also had a distinct 'social personality', which Fortes saw as being shaped, as we have seen, by his chiefly office, his *naam*. 'His social personality is that of an autocrat, never crossed or denied, with power far greater than he really has,' Fortes later observed. 'Considering this, the rest of the morning was rather surprising. We went to sit in the *Zontoo*, and had a general talk. . . . And the chief spoke to me about Gingang and his ancestors – quite freely and openly and with imagination.'[38]

What became apparent to Fortes is that underneath Nambiong's autocratic and tough outward demeanour – the social personality of a Mossi-Dagomba chief – he was crippled with the anxieties of office. Much of this was the result of colonial conquest: not only had British rule facilitated the rise of local rivals like Tengol and Bassana, it had also, from 1913, placed the *tongrana* under a divisional chief of the Mamprugu kingdom, the Kurugu *naaba* or *kunaab* (see Allman and Parker 2005: 81–5). This is not to say that such tensions did not exist in the pre-colonial past: it is quite likely that even before the coming of the British, the position of *tongrana* was a precarious and troublesome one. Yet colonial rule made it more so – not because the British took authority *away* from the *tongrana*, but because, in their need for a defined hierarchy of rule over a stateless people like the Talensi, they sought to support and enhance that authority. 'It is certainly obvious that Tongrana never in the past had as much control even over his own people, as he has now, in virtue of the white man's administrative arrangements,' Fortes wrote. 'But the very same . . . [authority] which gives him such control also robs him of initiative, defeats his powers of using sanctions which conform with the social organisation. He is today more afraid of the white man than of anybody or any power whatsoever.'[39]

Each move towards administrative reform was a matter of nervous apprehension on the part of Nambiong. Now actively taking Fortes aside for confidential talks, he set out the history of the Namoo migration from Mamprugu, explained their independence from the *kunaab* and bemoaned how the British had misread the political landscape. 'The primary difficulty is Kunaab. "He wants to reduce me to nothing," he protested. "I was a big man. I owned all the Tallense". . . . He almost pleaded, begging me to help him.'[40] In another conversation on the topic of the migration of young men to the south, the *tongrana* again harked back to the relative certainties of the past:

> 'I don't want people to run to Kumasi. I want them to stay and plough – I want people.' . . . Incidentally, he gave me a lecture – in answer to my teasing – on power, *pay*. What is *naam*, he said? *Naam* means you eat people, *i diit niriba*. That is how you get wealth, *bon*. If you as chief have no *bon*, your people have none.[41]

[38]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, no date, 30–1. *Zontoo*: a chief's 'private' room, containing important ritual objects; Gingang: a ritual festival and accompanying dances.
[39]MF Diary 1935 Vol. 4, 22 February 1935, 6.
[40]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 19 October 1934, 34.
[41]*Ibid.*, 15 November 1934, 70–1. To eat, *dii*, meaning here 'to accumulate'.

This may have been more aspiration that reality – but little or none of this ideology of power made it into Fortes's published vision of the 'stateless' Talensi.

On 24 November 1934, a grand *durbar* was held at Zuarungu at which Chief Commissioner Jones attempted to explain the rationale of indirect rule. 'A burlesque farce,' Fortes confided to his diary. 'The climax was a speech, interpreted with magnificence [and] admirable resourcefulness by Bassana, delivered in uninspiring parliamentary journalese, nothing but platitudes in it.' At the heart of indirect rule in the Northern Territories was to be the belated imposition of direct taxation, although this was somewhat lost in translation: 'poor Bassana did not know what contribute meant, and he turned his tongue around it, eventually giving the impression that the *Gomna* would pay the chiefs and the people for some unstated work!'[42] From Zuarungu, the official party moved on a few days later to Tongo, their arrival signalled 'by a triumphal appearance of the Gologdana with a vast following of women, children, men. He came on his charger . . . drums thumping, he seemed to be a pyramid of cloth, layer upon layer of cloth.'[43] Taking advantage of the occasion, Tengol had petitioned the administration and scored a major victory, securing permission for all the exiled Tale hill-folk to return to their ancestral homes and making a fluent case for the end of the ban on the Bonaab shrine destroyed and outlawed during the conquest. Even Fortes was impressed with Tengol's carefully choreographed display of music, dancing and supporting testimony from elderly *tengdaanas*: it was, he noted, 'a great show'.[44] Nambiong's response is unrecorded, although given his explanation to Fortes of the meaning of power: '*naam* means you eat people', Tengol's growing following can only have been a matter of more concern.[45]

The announcement of the lifting of the 23-year ban on settlement in the Tong Hills had an electrifying impact. Within days, house-building operations were under way, with teams of women on the move between the sites of ancestral homesteads (*daboog*) in order to take part in construction and the pounding of the clay floors.[46] The return to the hills, Allman and I argued, 'represents a key moment in the encounter between the Talensi and British colonialism', marking the end of the protracted era of conquest and pacification (Allman and Parker 2005: 194). Fortes's papers reveal that it also marked a crucial turning-point in his own encounter with the Talensi. Until the end of 1934, his fieldwork had been concentrated almost entirely upon the Namoo community of Tongo and its immediate neighbours on the flatlands to the north of the hills. Aside from their early and impressionistic experience of the Gologo festival and the occasional visit to Tengol's new compound, they had barely ventured up to Tengzug. There was every reason for this: the hills were depopulated and their inhabitants scattered on the surrounding plains. With their resettlement came the dramatic reconstruction of social life. This opened up a whole new world for Fortes: the

[42] *Ibid.*, 25 November 1934, 83.
[43] *Ibid.*, 29 November 1934, 87.
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] But see MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 4, 3 April 1935, recording the *tongrana*'s bitter anger 'at the Golibdana's flaunting of the ancient and traditional privileges and emblems of chietainship'.
[46] For detailed descriptions and important ethnographic material, see MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 6 and 23 December 1934, 96–9, 111–15; M29, 9 December 1934, ff.

ritual realm of the autochthonous Tale clans focused on the great shrines and festivals of Tengzug.

The resettlement of the hills from November 1934 coincided with the Bo'araam festival, the second major yearly event in the Talensi ritual calendar. Whereas Gologo was focused on the great earth shrine Ngoo, the ritual action of Bo'araam centred on the parallel ancestor shrines, including the induction of young men of the Tale clans into the esoteric *bo'ar* cult and pilgrimages to Tongnaab shrines by those from beyond Taleland who were the 'children' or *saem* of the god. The hills contained some dozen Tongnaab shrines, but the two most important were Yanii, managed by a group of ritual collaborators dominated by Tengol and his Bukiok clan, and Bonaab, managed by the *tengdaana*s of a different grouping of Tale clans under the leadership of the *kpatarnaaba*, Tiezien. Fortuitously, Fortes acquired at this moment a new collaborator of his own, one Dinkaha, whose appearance on the scene, along with Fortes's improving language skills, seems to have marked the end of the services of Anaho Bari. That is to say, Dinkaha acquired Fortes, assiduously courting him as an ally in a dispute over the succession to the Gbeog *tengdaana*-ship. Upon discovering this, Fortes played along, as he needed an entry into the alien world of the hills. 'The astounding thing is the ignorance of the Namoos about the inner mysteries of the Boyaraam,' he noted, admitting that 'what we have seen of Boyaraam was made possible by the enterprise of [Dinkaha]'.[47] On 26 December 1934, as house building proceeded all around, Tiezien solemnly took Fortes to view the newly 'reopened' Bonaab shrine. The anthropologist's naivety with regard to the imprint of sacred space is quite striking: 'I teased them . . . saying that it was no bayare any longer, as all the pots had been broken and the [shrine] destroyed. They – all and one – however, laughingly repudiated my suggestions. No, it is still a bayare. . . . I asked if their fathers [i.e., ancestors] were still there. Oh yes, they said, they are still here.'[48]

Six weeks later, in an encounter brokered by Dinkaha, Fortes followed this up with a first visit to the rival Yanii shrine. 'He is shrewd enough to realise my weakness for bayares and to exploit this,' Fortes later noted.[49] Dinkaha, it emerged, had a close association with Tengol, who in turn sought to exploit Fortes's eagerness to uncover the 'inner mysteries' of the ancestor cult and Tongnaab. Inviting Fortes to witness a sacrifice at a special medicine shrine, Dinkaha 'dramatically ushered [in] the Golibdaana'. 'With real dignity and self-possession', Tengol proceeded to set out his side of the dispute with the *tongrana*, supported by ancestral history as well as that of the colonial conquest – admitting that he was indeed made a chief by the British, but that he had served them well and that his legitimacy rested on the ancient office of *golibdaana*. In spite of the fact that he had given Nambiong six wives, the *tongrana*, he lamented, 'had always been hostile to him and has always tried to spoil him with the white man'.

[47]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 7 November 1934, 63, and 11 November 1934, 64; see too MF Notebook F 'Boyaraam'; M29, 24 December 1934, 49. Dinkaha was the unnamed friend of whom Fortes later wrote that he 'first enabled me, in 1935, to break the resistance of the Hill Tallis and be initiated into their Boghar [*bo'ar*] cult': cited in Allman and Parker 2005: 202.

[48]MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 3, 26 December 1934, 118. 'Bayere': *ba'er*, ancestor shrine.

[49]This and following quotations in this paragraph from *ibid*., 30 January 1935, 150.

Despite his growing personal affinity with Nambiong, Fortes had some sympathy with all this. Yet Tengol's concerted efforts to win the anthropologist over were ultimately frustrated. Although Fortes was suitably impressed with the grandeur of Yanii's hill-top location and its 'spectacular mystery', he was perplexed at what he dismissed as the 'mumbo jumbo' associated with the pilgrims' consultation with the oracular deity. Indeed, just two days before the visit, he had been informed by one of his Namoo informants from Gbizug, one Naambulig, that the 'mystery of the Tallensi boyars is a fraud. . . . He says that when they "enter" on Boyaraam night and one of the officiants . . . pretends to hear his *yaab* [i.e., ancestor] speak, the noise of rapping stones and murmurs is made by a man who secrets himself in the boyar.'[50] For Fortes, the apparent deception of the oracular voice was a real issue. 'How constant the pattern is – the secret voice!', he would note. 'What can be the function of a secret such as this which is not a secret to those stage managing it?'[51] This was a question that Fortes never answered, simply concluding that the oracular aspect of the Tongnaab cult was nothing more than a piece of fraudulent magic. Despite Tengol's best efforts – and his success with Sonia – it was his rival Nambiong who won the struggle to claim Fortes as 'his' stranger, his *saan*.[52]

So things stood when the Forteses returned to England in early April 1935. In a long closing entry in his diary on the political situation, Meyer attempted to sum up 'the tangle of hostilities, jealousies, rivalries and mutual apprehensiveness which constitute inter-relations of the Tongrana, the Golibdana and the Kpatarnaab'.[53] His appraisal of the position of Golibdaana Tengol was relatively straightforward: he 'acts and lies like a usurper and impostor, aware of the slender foundations of his claims'. 'He protests too that he likes the Tongrana or else why would he have given him *his own daughter* in marriage as well as other Tenzugu girls? . . . And his every effort is to prove that he is both in virtue of his service to the white man and by his ancestry and ritual position the true lord of the hill.' The Tongrana's position was more ambivalent: 'he is afraid – mortally afraid – of anything which can arouse the censure of the DC . . . [and] would willingly sacrifice traditional convention for the sake of the white man's approval'. He was, Fortes stressed, restrained from challenging Tengol openly, 'expecting the white man – me in particular – to do his dirty work for him'. This was in part because of the striking success of Tengol's carefully worked-out marriage alliances. '*Ndeema*, is how he [*Tongrana* Nambiong] always speaks of him. To cause his *deema* to suffer and fall would he says be very distressing. It would break his wife's heart. . . . It would make life unbearable to have his wife sitting around weeping all day.'[54] 'All of the contestants assiduously cultivate me (just as the Golibdaana cultivates Bassana and Kunaa for the same reason),' Fortes wrote. This included his friend Nambiong: 'he, too, is hardly free from the ulterior motive of using me to become a big chief, equal to the *Kunaa*'. That such a summary should mark the

[50] *Ibid*., 8 February 1935, 161.

[51] MF Notebook D, 30 August 1936, 89; see too Notebook G, 24 December 1936, 19. On this question, see Wood 2003.

[52] On the concept of *saan*, see Fortes 1975: 229–30.

[53] This and following quotations in this paragraph from MF Diary 1934–5 Vol. 4, 1 April 1935, 45–9. Emphasis in original.

[54] *Ndeema*: in-law.

end of the Forteses' first year of residence among the Talensi speaks volumes. Rather than the timeless structures of kinship and clanship, it was the internecine political competition unleashed by the coming of colonial rule that had come to dominate local affairs – and Fortes's own attention.

HONOUR AND ANXIETY ON A COLONIAL FRONTIER

Meyer Fortes's diaries and notebooks from the second period of fieldwork in 1936–7 serve to confirm, but do not greatly add to, the narrative of his own role in the formulation of indirect rule in Taleland. Although Fortes did not know it, that he was even allowed to return to the Gold Coast was a close-run thing. His hostility towards aspects of colonial rule – which he did not confine to the pages of his diary – had him branded as a 'reactionary' by Chief Commissioner Jones, who reluctantly approved the resumption of research only after he agreed to provide information on Talensi society that would facilitate political reform.[55] That he would do, working closely with Kerr and Gibbs in drafting the plans for indirect rule, which included, as elsewhere in the Northern Territories, the replacement of the forced labour regime with one based on direct taxation, the abolition of the *kambonaaba*s and the return to what was seen as a more traditional 'family' system of governance based on the hallowed authority of the *tengdaana*s. In June 1937, modernized native authority was vested in the new Tallensi Federation, a ten-man council with a circulating presidency under the initial leadership of the *tongrana*. Tengzug was to be represented, in turn, by the *golibdaana* and the *kpatarnaaba* and, in a great victory for Nambiong, the *kunaab* was removed from the scene and ordered to return to Mamprugu. Fortes had intervened decisively in favour of his friend Nambiong's version of the Talensi past – although, ironically, the latter would subsequently subvert the constitution by parlaying his role as *primus inter pares* into that of a 'head chief' (Allman and Parker 2005: 204–6; Anafu 1973).

What the Fortes papers do demonstrate, amongst other things, is a striking level of anxiety, unease and self-doubt on the part of leading figures in the Talensi political landscape in the mid-1930s. That European imperial conquest engendered a degree of psychological dissonance on the part of colonized subjects is hardly a novel conclusion. It was suggested at the time that such dissonance was a worrying by-product of 'culture contact', and the idea would re-emerge famously in the terminal phase of colonial rule in Africa in the work of Frantz Fanon, who urged that the psychological violence of colonialism be purged through revolutionary counter-violence. Indeed, Fortes himself would return to the theme in the 1960s, when, following a return visit to the Talensi with his second wife, Doris Mayer, the two published a paper on forms of psychosis generated by social change (Fortes and Mayer 1966).[56] Recent attention on the part of historians to everyday literary production by Africans, moreover, has begun to reveal some of the nuance of individual emotional lives under colonial rule (Barber 2006).

[55]On these negotiations, see Allman and Parker 2005: 200–1.
[56]Sonia Fortes died in 1957.

Yet such intimate emotions and anxieties have tended to be recorded by newly literate products of colonial education – individuals like Anaho Bari, whose journals await more detailed description and analysis. Rarely have they featured in accounts of the older generation who grew to adulthood before the opening of the colonial encounter and who, despite recent advances in the historiography, so often remain cardboard cut-outs for want of any insight into their individual personhood or worldview. This lack of intimacy is particularly striking on remote 'tribal' frontiers, beyond missions, schools or, given their capacity to generate written records, colonial courtrooms. Anaho, it must be recalled, was in the mid-1930s the solitary literate Talensi of the 35,000 or so resident inhabitants of Taleland. In such backwaters, the only individuals to emerge from the colonial archive tend to be those designated in one way or another as 'chiefs' and whose recorded personalities rarely extend beyond their propensity, or not, to comply with administrative fiat. As Fortes remarked of Tiezien, to colonial officials he was 'merely a crabbed old man'.[57] It is here that the lure of the remote and supposedly uncontaminated tribal society for the first generation of professional anthropologists can pay dividends for the historian – if, that is, the mass of incidental observation, interaction and intrigue can be separated from the functionalist kinship systems that dominate the published oeuvres of the period. It is fascinating to see just how torn Fortes himself was between these contrasting aspects of social life. 'Have been at Kpataar now a week,' he wrote in late 1936. 'I find writing up these ceremonies a terrible bore. Far more interesting would be . . . stories, personal histories, and work with kids. But Boyaraam must be done.'[58] 'The drama of ordinary life, of kinship, marriages, quarrels, etc., is much more amusing – perhaps because there is the individual, personal element, the . . . spontaneity of psychological revelation, in it.'[59]

Granted, the spontaneity of psychological revelation recorded in his papers does not extend much beyond that of leading Talensi elders: *Tongrana* Nambiong, *Golibdaana* Tengol, *Kpatarnaaba* Tiezien and a handful of other senior male interlocutors. Yet these insights point to an aspect of Africa's colonial history that has been neglected: the sheer emotional toll that wrestling with the vagaries of colonial power took upon men brought up within fiercely exacting codes of masculinity and honour. The historiography has now moved beyond the dichotomy between 'resisters' and 'collaborators' towards a more nuanced appreciation of negotiation and accommodation – but has not yet fully grasped just how complex, and for some traumatic, accommodation with colonial power could be.

For Fortes – a psychologist before he was an anthropologist – this was manifested as a destabilizing gulf between an individual's 'social personality' and their proper selves. Recall his comparison between Tiezien and Nambiong: the former 'is "genuine" not nasaara tainted . . . not like the Tongrana, a social personality completely defined by his "naam"'. This caused Fortes considerable frustration. By 1936, his lively, wide-ranging conversations with the *tongrana* were a thing of the past: 'his sole . . . obsession, in my presence, is with his status

[57]MF Diary 1936–7 Vol. 1, 8 May 1936, 21.
[58]MF Diary 1936–7 Vol. 2, 18 November 1936, 101.
[59]*Ibid.*, 30 November 1936, 111; see too M5 (1936–7) Kpatar II, 'Children at Kpatar'.

and his power'.[60] 'There is something quite obsessional about the constant harping on of the Namoos, especially the older men, on their naam, their status, their quarrel with the Golibdaana,' he added.[61] On the other side of the conflict, *Golibdaana* Tengol, too, was just as obsessively single-minded. Of the key local intermediaries considered here, only Bassana Moshi – the ex-slave and ethnic outsider who forged a new and unambiguous identity as a agent of the colonial state – emerges from Fortes's records as secure and possessing peace of mind.

At the heart of this cleavage in what Fortes called 'Tale social psychology' was a profound ambivalence towards colonial power, *nasaara naam*, which elders feared and loathed, on the one hand, but desperately sought favour from, on the other. A revelatory conversation with Nambiong as Fortes's time among the Talensi was drawing to a close throws light on this. 'A visit from the Tongrana and a long chat – the usual topics, his court, the Golibdaana, Kunaab, DCs.' But, with considerable prodding from Fortes, Nambiong suddenly opened up on the question of honour: 'We don't fear death – is death anything? If you are once dead finish is it not done?; but shame [*valem*] that is what we fear – shame which spoils your head we fear. That is why I fear [to] do anything which may cause the white man annoyance and perhaps make him remove my chiefship.'[62] It was chiefship that created hostility and, he admitted, the threat of sorcery, from political rivals.

> He described how hostile people were to him after he got his naam. Disappointed candidates would not have let matters rest if not for the fact that the white man's power was paramount. *Ba daa fu booa mboo*? (Did they not desire my destruction?). At various times, different articles of his personal use were stolen – food pots, his spittoon, and so on. What for? *La ba bosa mboo* – to make medicine against him to kill him.[63]

As elsewhere in interwar Africa, the fear of sorcery and 'witchcraft' emerges as a manifestation of anxiety resulting from the psychological strains of the colonial situation.[64]

Meyer Fortes's complex personal relationship with leading contestants in the escalating political conflict gripping Talensi country in the mid-1930s represents just one narrative thread drawn from his vast unpublished corpus. It does, however, indicate the potential of the ethnographic archive as a source for a more intimate social history of remote African peoples who, once they had yielded to colonial rule, tended to pass under the radar of the state. All too often, such peoples figure only as undifferentiated, faceless tribes – 'the Talensi', 'the Lobi', 'the Dogon', and so on – entities which, ironically, were in part forged by canonical colonial-era anthropology. Fortes's work served to inscribe the Talensi as an archetypal acephalous society, yet the records of his fieldwork reveal an anxiety about power, status and influence that complicates received notions of 'statelessness'. These records are also mediated by the ethnographer and Fortes, as we have seen, was far from being a disinterested observer. Yet he was nothing

[60]MF Diary 1936–7 Vol. 1, 27 April 1936, 1.
[61]*Ibid.*, 8 May 1936, 21.
[62]*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 9 September 1936, 97. Fortes's translation interposed with the verbatim Talen.
[63]*Ibid.*, 99.
[64]On the southern Gold Coast, see Field 1960 and Allman and Parker 2005; on the Northern Territories, Parker 2006.

if not perceptive, observant and sensitive, with a sharp eye for 'the drama of ordinary life' with its potential for psychological revelation. And of course he had intimate access to a world that has now vanished. Let me conclude with his closing diary entry from those extraordinary two years of fieldwork, and the words of his friend Nambiong:

> Tongrana describing how downcast he was at my imminent departure said that on the afternoon when I went in to tell him he went inside and lay down . . . absolutely quietly, silently. The poyakpeem noticed and asked him what was wrong . . . I teased him how could the poyakpeem know. . . . If he were not feeling downcast, he would have joined into the conversation of the women and children. That is how she knew. . . . 'It is as if a death had occurred in my house. I have no heart for conversation – I want to weep.'[65]

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[65]MF '2/37', 19 April 1937, 259.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the encounter between the social anthropologist Meyer Fortes and his wife Sonia, on the one hand, and the Talensi people of northern Ghana, on the other, in the years 1934–7. Based in large part on the Forteses' extensive corpus of recently archived field notes, diaries and other papers, it argues that the quotidian dynamics of that encounter were in many ways quite different from those of Talensi social life as enshrined in Meyer's famous published monographs. Far from entering a timeless world of enduring clanship and kinship, the Forteses grappled with a society struggling to come to terms with the forces of colonial change. The focus is on the couple's shifting relationship with two dominant figures in the local political landscape in the 1930s: *Tongrana* Nambiong, the leading Talensi chief and their host in the settlement of Tongo, and *Golibdaana* Tengol, a wealthy ritual entrepreneur who dominated access on the part of 'stranger' pilgrims to the principal oracular shrine in the adjacent Tong Hills. These two bitter rivals were, by local standards, commanding figures – yet both emerge as psychologically complex characters riddled with anxiety, unease and self-doubt. The ethnographic archive is thereby shown to offer the possibility of a more intimate history of the interior lives of non-literate African peoples on remote colonial frontiers who often passed under the radar of the state and its documentary regime.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la rencontre entre l'anthropologue social Meyer Fortes et sa femme Sonia, d'une part, et les Talensi du Nord du Ghana, d'autre part, de 1934 à 1937. S'appuyant largement sur l'important corpus de notes de terrain, journaux et autres documents récemment archivés des Fortes, il soutient que la dynamique quotidienne de cette rencontre était à bien des égards très différente de celle de la vie sociale des Talensi consacrée par les célèbres monographies publiées de Meyer. Loins de pénétrer dans un monde intemporel de clans et de parentés, les Fortes découvraient une société s'accommodant difficilement des forces du changement colonial. L'accent est mis sur la relation changeante du couple avec deux personnages dominants du paysage politique local des années 1930 : *Tongrana* Nambiong, principal chef talensi et hôte des Fortes à Tongo, et *Golibdaana* Tengol, riche entrepreneur rituel qui maîtrisait l'accès au principal sanctuaire oraculaire de la région voisine des Tong Hills par les pèlerins « étrangers ». Ces deux grands rivaux étaient à l'échelle locale des personnes imposantes qui apparaissent pourtant comme des personnages psychologiquement complexes en proie à l'anxiété, au malaise et au doute. L'article montre par là-même que les archives ethnographiques offrent la possibilité d'une histoire plus intime de l'existence intérieure de peuples africains analphabètes sur des frontières coloniales reculées qui échappaient souvent à l'attention de l'État et à son régime documentaire.