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*Editors*

# The Intangible Elements of Culture in Ethnoarchaeological Research

# Chapter 1

## A Plea for General Anthropology

Alain Galloway

### Introduction

Concepts that are drawn from an often very superficial knowledge of economic, social, and cultural anthropology are commonly used in archaeological interpretations. This paper proposes to clarify a means for improving the conditions for interpreting remains, particularly with regards to functional interpretations. This involves calling the very practices of anthropology into question.

The theoretical presentation will be illustrated with a concrete example: the concept of “prestige goods” that is often used by archaeologists (Galloway 2010c, 2013b; Galloway and Ceuninck 1998; Galloway and Burri-Wyser 2014). To accomplish this, this paper will follow a logicist approach, starting with an analysis of actual archaeological discourse (logicist analysis) in order to attempt to improve the discipline’s practices (logicist synthesis).

*Logicist analysis* primarily utilizes the analyzing and rewriting of “traditional” work, allowing to better understand the archaeologists’ reasoning and the nature of the concepts that were used, which in this case happens to be “prestige good.” Archeology is a field that often falls under “shared meaning,” if not “common thought.” This exercise nevertheless allows for leading to a certain number of constraints that could give the text a better foundation. Thus, we will transition from a purely descriptive analysis towards an approach that is meant to be more normative.

*Logicist synthesis* is situated at the level where these constraints are implemented in new discourses using terms that are better defined. This second step must be accomplished by using knowledge from social anthropology and ethnohistory (Galloway 2007b). The diagram in Fig. 1.1 summarizes the approach that was followed in this paper, which will primarily draw on examples from West Africa.

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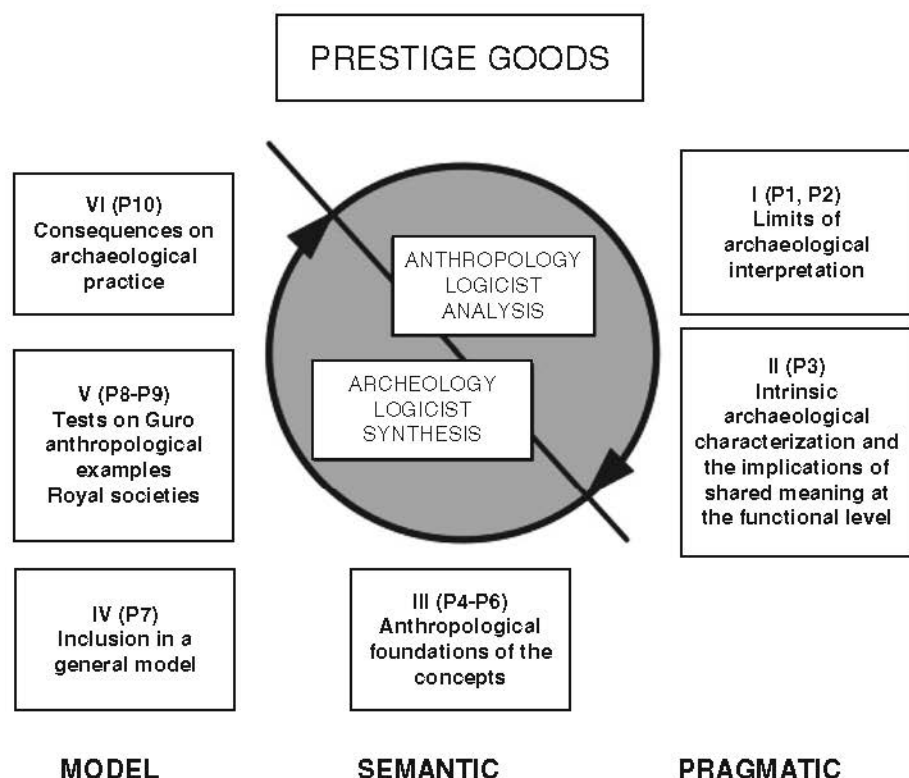


Fig. 1.1 Stages for analyzing an anthropological concept

The paper includes six sections: (1) Understanding the limits of archaeological discourse; (2) The analysis of the characteristics of objects that were deemed relevant in order to define a concept and the implications of shared meaning at the functional level; (3) The anthropological foundations of the concepts; (4) The proposal of a trans-cultural model; (5) Application to concrete ethnographic examples (the Guro of the Ivory Coast, kingships of the forest zone); and (6) Evaluation of the relevance of the concept at the archaeological level.

## Limits of Archaeological Interpretation

1. (P1) - The transition from the description (Cc) and organization (Tc) of archaeological remains to functional interpretations (Ec) creates a significant rift.
2. (P2) - It would be impossible to advance the interpretation of anthropological remains without also constructing a general anthropology that is better integrated with physical data.

An archaeologist who is working in isolation can only come up with typological constructions (Tc) that combine time and space. These are, in other words, expert reports. He or she may thus successfully identify an object's provenance, define the probable geographical distribution of objects of the same type (expertise concerning L, location), and date it (expertise concerning T, time). However, using this method, he or she is really nothing more than an antiquities dealer.

In contrast, the archaeologist is unable to propose functional interpretations on the economic, social, political, or ideological significance of the object in society or historical explanations based solely on archaeological evidence. This situation is the source of the fragility of our constructions and the reason that common, non-scientific thought encroaches on an approach that is considered scientific (Gallay 2011b, 2015a).

The interpretation (Ec) is expressed in the form of one or several final Pn proposition(s) that are considered to be directly derived from the internal analysis of archaeological evidence. However, the conditions for transitioning from a typological construction (archaeological data organized into groups) to an explanatory construction are generally either poorly explained or not explained at all. Indeed, there are numerous projects that employ an impressive array of techniques, each one more sophisticated than the last, to describe and organize their data (Djindjian 1991). However, they also display a surprising indifference when it comes time to interpret their results at a functional level, whether in terms of ethnography, sociology, politics, economics, etc. This is a common peculiarity of projects in the English-speaking world that often have very ambitious goals concerning the understanding of past societies.

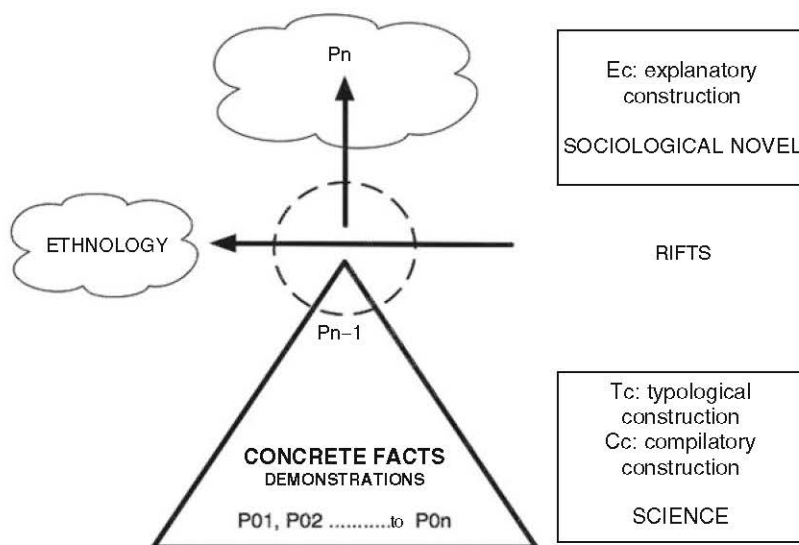
We are, therefore, in the midst of a true epistemological rift that separates compilatory and typological constructions from explanatory constructions that deal with the economic, social, political, and ideological components of past societies. This rift hinges on both the nature of the facts used and the weakness of the analogical reasoning. Thus, it has two causes: The first, strictly archaeological, hinges on the limited nature of the facts used, the weakness of the analogical reasoning that calls on outside knowledge, and often very superficial knowledge about ethnological concepts at the same time. The second, specific to ethnologists, is located at the level of the insufficiency of the anthropological debate in terms of questions of trans-culturalism, since this discipline is primarily interested in societal diversity and therefore proposes information that is most often deemed irreducible.

One of the essential questions addressed here is therefore situated at the anthropological level itself. In both cases, the often "literary" form of the writings often makes the evaluation of these questions rather delicate (Figs. 1.2 and 1.3).

## **Intrinsic Archaeological Characterization and the Implications of Shared Meaning at the Functional Level**

3. (P3) - Anthropological reflection must originate from an analysis of the concepts used in archaeological projects.





**Fig. 1.2** Rifts occurring between the lower portions of archaeological constructions (*Cc*, *Tc*) and Interpretations (*Ec*)

The examination of archaeological evidence must allow for clarifying the content of the concepts as they are used by archaeologists (e.g., Pétrequin et al. 2012). The definition that an archaeologist might give the objects themselves, based on their intrinsic characteristics (materials, shapes, ornaments), is used as the foundation, since only this field, at least at first, is accessible to archeology; afterwards, the interpretations are mapped out according to their “shared meaning.”

Archaeologists have a habit of considering objects that satisfy a certain number of intrinsic characteristics in terms of material, shape, and ornamentation (as well as those below) as prestige goods (Gallay 2013b; Gallay and Ceuninck 1998; Gallay and Burri-Wyser 2014):

- The raw material(s) used is/are from distant locations.
- The raw material(s) used is/are rare.
- The ornamentation is rich and meticulous.
- Several raw materials are used together.
- The operational chain of production is particularly complex.
- The investment of time and/or energy in production is significant.
- The object fulfills certain criteria of standardization.
- The object is not of practical use in everyday life.
- The object may be integrated into the world of the symbolic and thus ends up incorporated into iconography.

It is not required for all these characteristics to be present at the same time in order to recognize a prestige good, which can make identification difficult. Indeed, only one characteristic may be sufficient for defining an object as a prestige good.

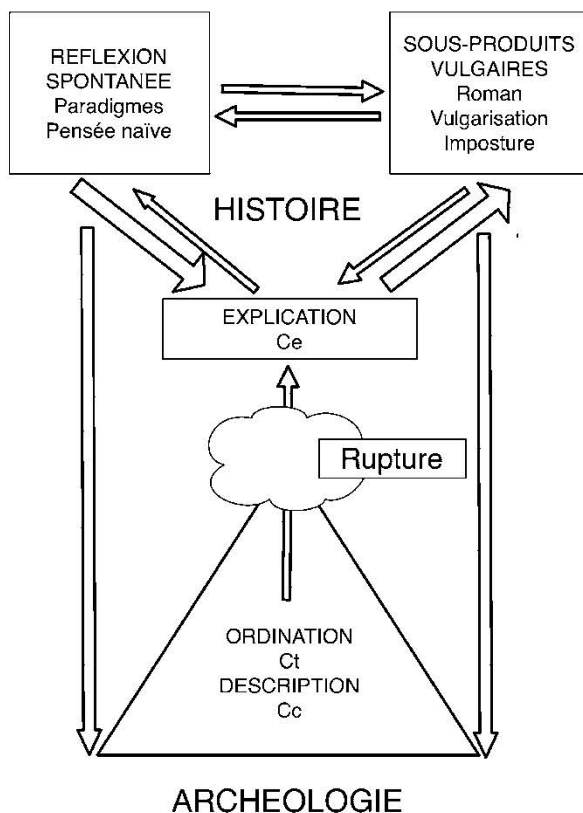


Fig. 1.3 The many aspects of common thought

In the Guro culture of the Ivory Coast, raw elephant tusks were prestige goods (Meillassoux 1964), and the same went for the leopard skins used to clothe certain African kings or tiger skins in certain Tibetan populations. This situation shows that the identification of a prestige good in archaeological practice generally also involves extrinsic criteria, such as the context of discovery, the location of the discovery, spatial or geographic distribution, or associations with other objects, etc.

On the other hand, it is worth remembering that living things may fall into the category as well. Such is the case of livestock, the raising of which represented a large economic investment, or even human beings as slaves, which were the result of a wartime investment in capturing them.

Arguments of shared meaning allow for extending the intrinsic characteristics of objects from some of the functional interpretations dealing with universal semantics:

- The rareness of the raw materials used, their distant origins, and the complexity and sophistication of the operational chain, which implies a considerable investment of technology and energy, may point to a type of specialty handicraft (Roux and Corbetta 1990; Brun et al. 2005–2006).

- Standardization guarantees the interchangeability of objects of the same value, a valuable criterion in terms of the sphere of socially meaningful transactions unique to prestige goods, as well as objects in a single economic sector.
- The prestige objects, which are rare and/or sophisticated, are on the fringes of what is needed on a daily basis. They may be subject to hoarding and therefore display wealth to a certain extent.
- The prestige objects may be manipulated by the elite to affirm their political power.

Therefore, specialization, standardization, wealth, and political power are four concepts, that, among others, should be investigated further by referencing anthropological information.

## Anthropological Foundations of the Concepts

4. (P4) - Avoid the pitfalls of a functionalist viewpoint and separate the definitions of the study from the functions served by the object.
5. (P5) - Define the terms being used. In pre-colonial Africa, it is possible to distinguish between ordinary goods and goods that are tied to wealth, i.e., prestige goods and prestige goods of conspicuous value.

The trap presented by using a functionalist approach must be avoided here. Following Pareto (1909), it must be admitted that anthropology only starts with the end of the illusion of the transparency of actions' meaning in actors' minds.

First, we must clearly distinguish between the question of the definitions of the study and the functions that an object served. We must also separate this question of the study from the conclusions that mankind proposes. The question of the definition must not consider the stated intention of mankind, the meaning that mankind ascribes to an institution, or the reasons that it gives for deeming something "good;" these are interesting ideological data, but nothing more. They are worth acknowledging at some point during the analysis, but they should not be used as a starting point (Testart 1996a, b, 1998).

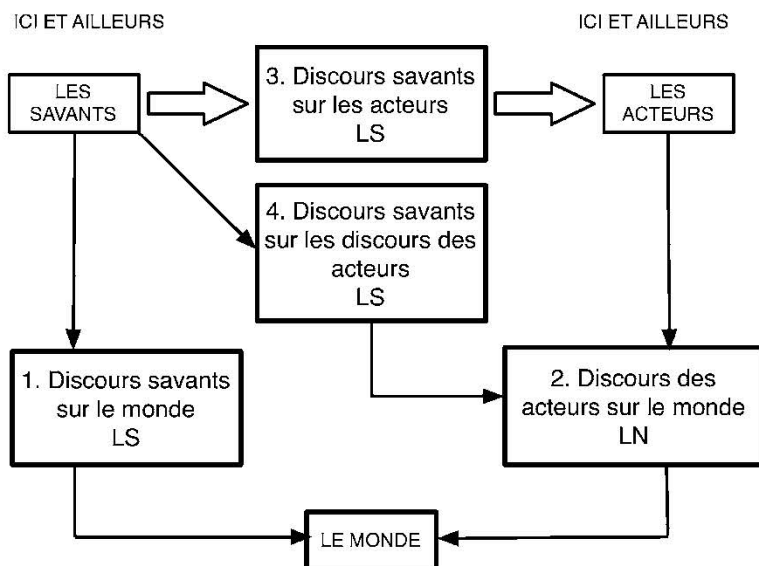
With this in mind, a distinction must be made between:

- The discourse of the observer (or the scholar) about the world.
- The discourse of the actors about the world.
- The discourse of the observer about the actors.

And potentially:

- The discourse of the observer about the discourse of the actors.

A distinction must be made between the rationality specific to forms of descriptive discourse and the scholar's explanatory reasoning, and the rationality ascribed by the actor to the content of his action, described and explained by this same scholar in terms of human sciences (Gallay 2011b; 2012; 2013c; 2014) (Fig. 1.4).



**Fig. 1.4** Relationships between the discourse of the actors and the “scholarly” discourse of the observers. These remarks primarily concern point number 3, i.e., scholarly discourse about the actors

The terms that are used must be defined in all their complexities by enlisting all available anthropological and ethnohistorical data. The concept of “prestige good” requires that the categories of goods involved and the types of transfers to which they are subjected be specified.

## *Categories of Goods*

At the very least, in pre-colonial Africa, it is possible to distinguish between four types of goods: ordinary goods, commodities, wealth objects, and prestige goods (either simple or ostentatious).

### **Ordinary Goods**

Ordinary goods are movable objects within the daily communal economy that are the result of either internal production (autosubsistence), acquisition via socio-economic exchanges (social transactions), or commercial exchanges (market economy). In Africa, these goods are produced by members of the community, either by men, women, or both sexes, and also by specialists belonging to particular lineages or castes. These goods circulate freely in the community (Meillassoux 1975, 1977).



The acquisition of certain goods from caste people involves a relationship of patronage between the “nobles” and the caste artisans that are attached to them (Tamari 1991, 1997, 2012; Diop 1981). Certain ordinary goods may nevertheless be acquired in markets within the framework of a peripheral market economy or during social transactions.

## **Commodities**

A commodity is a good that—in the eyes of its owner—only has worth in its capacity to be exchanged and not in its capacity to be used.

“A commodity is an object about which the decision to sell has already been made. Consequently, its effective exchange only depends on the conditions of the exchange (price, possibility of finding a buyer, etc.).” (Testart 2007, 134)

Commodities imply the presence of markets. If the political economy meaning of this term is dismissed, “the market—understood as a place or a network where commodities are exchanged—is a location where the decision to sell has already been made. Consequently, it is a location where the exchange is made without the intervention of another social relationship between traders other than the one that they form during the act of exchange itself.” (Testart 2007, 134)

## **Wealth Objects**

Wealth corresponds to an excess of ordinary goods that are not directly used for daily survival and that can therefore be monopolized in an inegalitarian way by certain individuals or social groups. In Africa, wealth is managed by the community elders, particularly for marital transactions (bride price).

The case of grains, millet, or rice is characteristic. In principle, an autosubsistence economy implies that everything that is produced is consumed. Nevertheless, agriculture generates a slight surplus that is used for planting or is stored in anticipation of less productive periods, which occur frequently in the Sahelian region. However, an additional surplus may be used to other ends. Granaries are therefore unquestionable symbols of wealth, if not prestige goods themselves.

## **Prestige Goods**

Prestige goods come from an excess amount of wealth used to social ends, particularly as part of the bride price. From a functional perspective, a prestige good is differentiated between a commodity, currency, and/or commodity money in that its meaning is dependent on those who own, manipulate, or exchange it. Also from a functional perspective, the concept of prestige good is still very close to that of a primitive currency, so they are often confused.

Indeed, a prestige good may share the following characteristics with primitive currencies:

- It may have small dimensions and make up, when gathered in greater numbers, a quantity that is divisible in accounting activities.
- It may serve as a standard of value or measurement.
- It may be subject to hoarding and thus have value as a sign.
- It may be a raw material for handicrafts and therefore have a value in use.

However, it is distinguishable from primitive money in two ways:

- It is not a commodity and is not involved in commercial exchange.
- Its meaning is dependent on those who own, manipulate, or exchange it.

This opposition shows that, strictly speaking, the prestige good is distinguished from primitive currency less by its intrinsic characteristics (material, formal properties) than by the nature of the transactions in which it is used and which fall into either the economic sphere or the social sphere (Garenne-Marot and Mille 2004–2005; Héritier 1975).

### **Ostentatious Prestige Goods**

This type of characterization of a good results from the conspicuous display of a surplus of prestige goods, hoarded since they are not being used, or stocked for social use at a later date.

What is to be done with wealth that remains uninvested in means of production, once one's social obligations have been fulfilled (by using prestige goods), since this wealth cannot be invested in land? The only solution consists of converting these goods into extravagant expenditures in recognized social forms. Wealth is thus converted into ostentation. This ostentation may be for display and/or for destruction.

As we will see, ostentation in Africa is not a sign of lineage-based societies, nor, probably, of the great Sahelian states (Gallay 2015b). On the other hand, it is more pronounced in societies that are not located on the fringes of the great states, like the kingships of the forest regions (Preston Blier 1998) (Fig. 1.5).

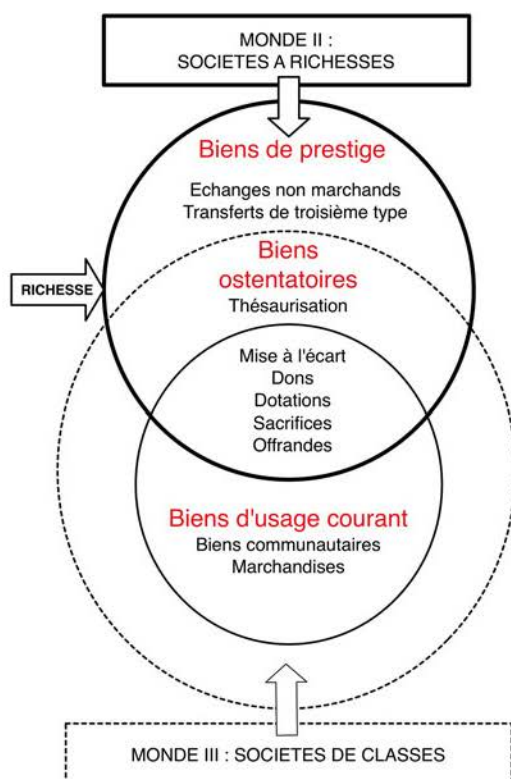
### ***Types of Transfers***

These various goods may be subject to a variety of transactions, of which concrete definitions should be given:

*Gift*: transfer of a good involving the renunciation of all rights to it, in particular the right to reciprocation ( $A + \rightarrow B +$ ) (Testart 2006, 2007).

*Offerings* and *grave goods* may also be included in the category of gifts with no obligation to reciprocate (see below) (Gallay forthcoming 1).

Fig. 1.5 Logical relations between ordinary goods, prestige goods, and ostentatious prestige goods



*Commercial exchange:* exchange between people with no need to maintain any relationship other than that of the exchange ( $A \rightarrow B+/B \rightarrow A+$ ).

*Non-commercial exchange:* exchange in which the actors maintain social links between each other in addition to that of the exchange. These links go beyond and outlive the exchange (kula, bride price,  $A \rightarrow B+/B \rightarrow A+$ ).

*Third-type exchange of dependence:* exchange existing solely through the statutory links between individuals, required but without an obligation to reciprocate (bonded labor, required dowry,  $A \rightarrow B+/B \rightarrow A0$ ).

*Third-type exchange of reparation or compensation:* exchange from a relationship of confrontation, required but without an obligation to reciprocate (blood debt,  $A \rightarrow B-/A \rightarrow B+$ ).

A *sacrifice*, which is a required religious transfer, may also follow the same formula (see below).

*Third-type vendetta exchange:* similar to the exchange for reparation, but with a sequence in time (head-hunting,  $A \rightarrow B-/B \rightarrow A-$ ).

(Table 1.1 may be used to clarify the different types of transfers involved in this model.)

6. (P6) - Evaluating the phenomenon's degree of contextualization.

Table 1.1 Typology of exchanges

Transfer required	No	Yes	Yes
Reciprocation required	No	Yes	No
	Gift	Exchange	Third-type
	<i>Present, potlatch, grave goods</i> (A + → B+)	<i>Commercial exchange</i> (A → B+/B → A+)	<i>Due to kinship or dependence</i> (A → B+/B → A0)
	<i>Unrequired dowry</i> (A + → B+)		<i>Required dowry</i> (A → B+/B → A0)
		<i>Non-commercial exchange</i> (Bride price, etc.) (A → B+/B → A+)	<i>Reparation, compensation</i> (A → B-/A → B+)
			<i>Vendetta</i> (A → B-/B → A-)
Religious analogies	<i>Offering</i> (A + → B+)		<i>Sacrifice</i> (A → B+/B → A0)

The *horizontal arrows* indicate the direction of the transfers and the *symbols* indicate the positive or negative consequences of the transfers. Modified and completed according to Testart 2007

A cultural phenomenon may have, depending on the definition given to it, a more or less general value. We must therefore evaluate a notion’s character of generality and contextualize it in terms of geography, chronology, and population. Indeed, it is rare for the functional interpretation of an object to have universal value immediately. From this perspective, the classificatory frameworks dealing with types of societies, such as those proposed by Alain Testart (2005), may have a certain amount of usefulness (Fig. 1.6).

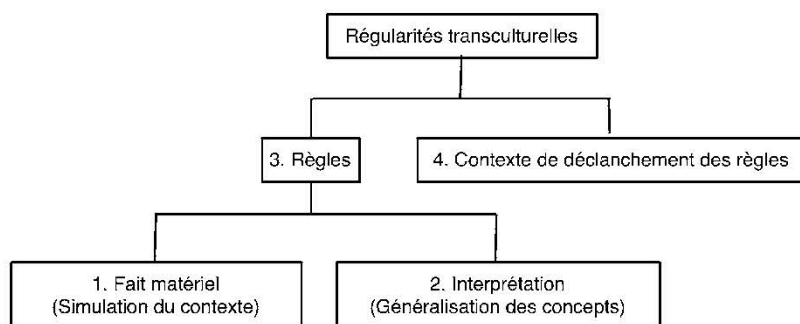
For West Africa, we attempted to extend the classificatory frameworks proposed by Testart (2005) while accounting for local characteristics. Our first global approach to the question became more in-depth by using the Wolof people in Senegal as an example and by proposing a cladistic approach for our classification (Tassy 1991; Darlu and Tassy 1993; O'Brien and Lyman 2003).

Three main groups have been outlined, based on a hypothetical stage of lineage-based societies: *prestige societies*, *segmented proto-state societies*, and *state class societies*. The branching of so-called “lineage-based” societies *sensu stricto* remains, per the principles of cladistics, a hypothetical stage that cannot be concretely identified by any other historical source (Horton 1971; Diop 1981; Gallay 2011a, b, 2013a, 2015b, forthcoming 1) (Fig. 1.7).

Prestige Societies

Prestige societies were comprised of *proto-chiefdoms* and *military-led leaderships*. They were characterized by the increased importance held by certain patriarchs who led the dominant lineages. The agricultural communities’ territories started to be





**Fig. 1.6** Contextualization of a general inference. The rules are possible this way if formulated “if  $p_i$ , then  $p_i + 1$ .”

ranked in connection with control systems, and domestic slavery began to develop. The caste system might have appeared at this stage, but the data on the subject remain imprecise and contradictory. A system of local and regional markets linked to a market economy began to develop. Political power remained a functional power linked to the prestige of certain patriarchs, and religious beliefs were still entirely animist.

### Segmented Proto-state Societies

Proto-state societies corresponded to the stage of *warrior despotism*, and they saw the appearance of a tributary method of production. Arab trade and trans-Saharan commerce began to develop with the establishment of international markets. In terms of society, an aristocratic class appeared that developed the exploitation of farming communities, and patronage relationships were established between certain sectors of the society.

### State Societies

A state-like method of production characterized this stage, which appeared to be linked to the development of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. As the trees that have been created show, this last class remains very diversified because it is composed of rather different states, such as *military dictatorships*, *mercantile states*, *Islamic states*, and *divine kingships*. Real, geographically limited land ownership may have appeared under special circumstances (Aubin 1982). A complex system of orders was established that displayed the characteristics of social classes. Those in power—who held a monopoly on violence—tended to assimilate external provinces and extend their territorial influence; however, the borders of these states remained unclear and poorly controlled (Fig. 1.8).

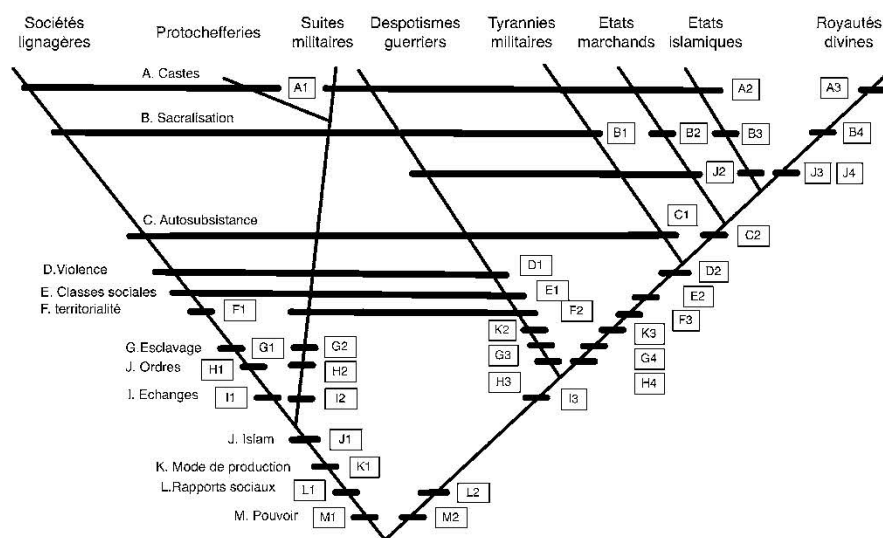


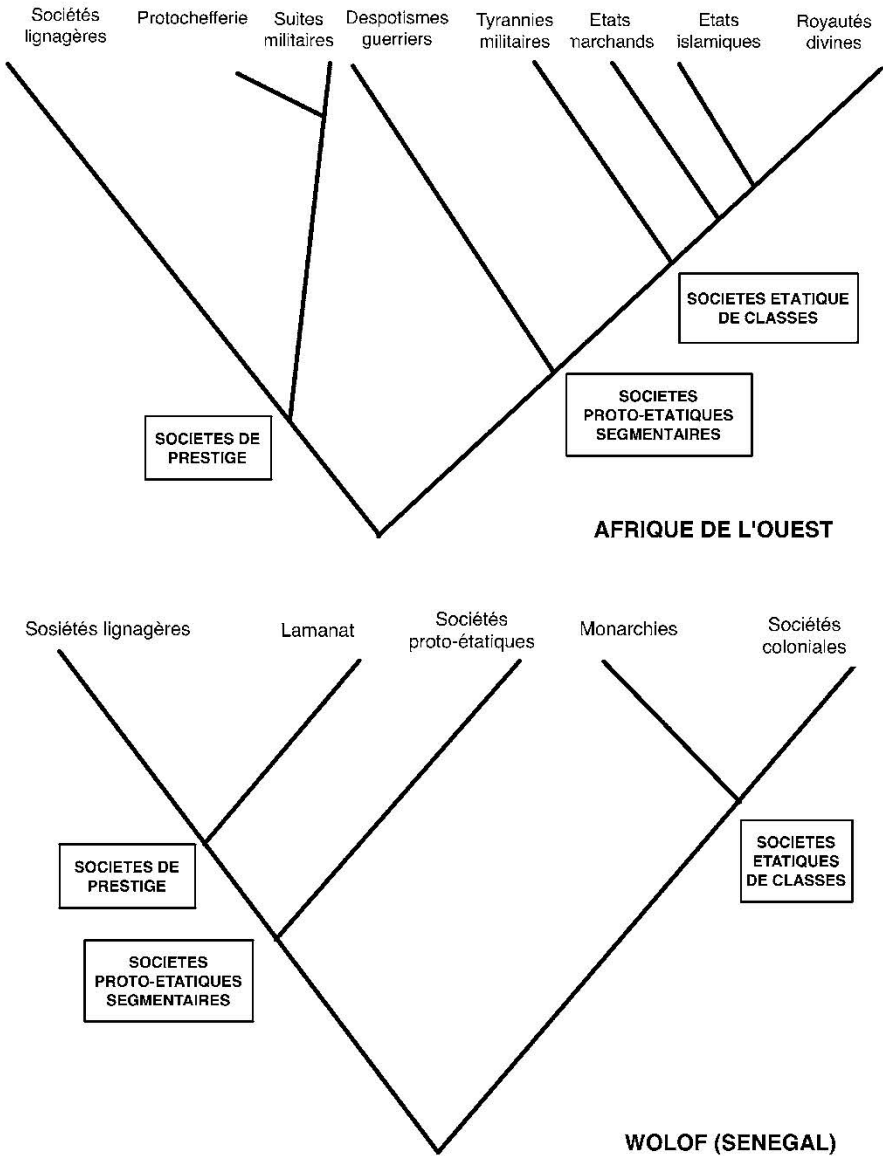
Fig. 1.7 Cladistic analysis of the development of precolonial West African societies

## Inclusion in a General Model

7. (P7) - Constructing a model that accounts for all interpretations proposed by archeology.

The analysis of the functions served by certain distinct types of objects or classes of objects must allow for constructing a model that accounts for all of the interpretations proposed by archeology. Like any model or structure, the typology that was constructed to account for the most frequently observed variability voids the temporal and historic dimension of the phenomena, leaving only the systemic relationships between the model's terms (Gallay 2010c) (Fig. 1.9).

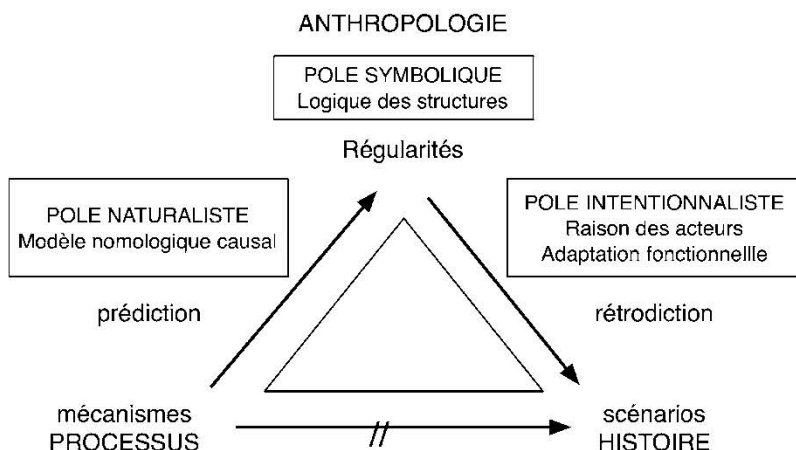
We may therefore use the concepts presented here to construct a diagram incorporating the possible functions of a prestige good. This contradicts an area where so-called "prestige goods" are produced, held, and may be subject to stocking or hoarding in a sector where various types of transfers are practiced. Prestige goods, for the most part, fall under both areas, involving movable objects, livestock, or slaves. However, certain goods, such as war trophies (severed heads, etc.), symbols of power, or *regalia* fall more specifically under the central area, generally of an ostentatious nature, and are only exceptionally the subject of a transaction (e.g., the slave trade). In this central area, wealth comes from hoarding and power is linked to ostentatious practices. The diagram includes all possible theoretical situations. It is therefore not a representation of particular situations that can only be developed in certain directions.



**Fig. 1.8** Comparison of the development trees of the Wolof and pre-colonial West African societies

**Transfer Domain**

Here, we distinguish between social, political, and religious domains. Social transfers are organized according to a dual flow linking the central domain to the transfer domain, whereas the political and religious domains involve goods that will not be



**Fig. 1.9** Sequence of the structures located between scenarios and mechanisms

returned to the system because they are either destroyed (sacrifices), lost (offerings, grave goods), or transferred and held definitively according to rules of succession that vary on a case-by-case basis (dowry, gift) (Gallay 2007a; Gallay and Ceuninck 1998; Gallay and Burri-Wyser 2014).

There is a general conceptual difficulty concerning the goods that are involved in these transfers. We associated the concept of the prestige goods mentioned above with the particular characteristics of the transfers to which they are subjected—in this case, non-mercantile transfers and third-type transfers. However, in relation to this definition, is the nature of the transactions necessary and sufficient? In short, can non-commercial transfers involve goods that are not prestige goods? The tentative response that we provide here is:

- The objects that are included in non-commercial transfers and third-type transfers may all be considered, by definition, prestige goods.
- However, objects that fall under the political and religious domains that are removed from the system may also involve ordinary goods.

## Economic Transfers

Here, the market economy (commercial exchanges) is contrasted with exchanges involving particular social actors (non-commercial exchanges and third-type exchanges).

A strictly businesslike ideology was developed, likely under the influence of the Mediterranean countries, in connection with Islam and the development of trans-Saharan trade routes. It presents rationales of individual profit that are based on the market rather than accumulation and that were developed within the caste of merchants who were sometimes competing with administrative and war powers.



This ideology is superimposed on much older, complex traditional commercial spheres. The traditional West African economy was not, in fact, a primitive one, and commercial exchanges facilitated by currencies were observed there. The situation may qualify as a “peripheral market” economy; commercial exchanges were superimposed onto the autosubsistence economy, which worked through exchange and redistribution, and could traditionally utilize several types of commodity monies, such as cowry shells, iron ingots, bolts of cloth, gold powder, etc., but that today use state-issued currencies (the CFA franc) (Devisse 1972; Perinbam 1972; Museur 1977; Ceuninck 2000; Gallay 2005, 2010a, 2011a). The market economy (Testart 2007) may take several forms, which are separated institutionally, depending on whether the markets where the transactions take place are local, regional, or international.

## Social Transfers

The social domain includes transfers that fall under certain social obligations and involves both non-commercial exchanges and third-type exchanges.

Let us use the “bride price” as one of the non-commercial exchanges. While handicraft activities were usually delegated to specific castes (according to a non-commercial, patronage-type exchange  $A \rightarrow B+/B \rightarrow A+$ ) or to specific lineages, these activities may also have been carried out by slaves, the relationship with whom logically falls under third-type exchange with the formula  $A \rightarrow B+/B \rightarrow A0$  (Gosselain 2008; Diop 1981).

In Africa, various types of compensation for serious offenses may be required by traditional judges. These judges’ aim is to compensate more than it is to provide reparations or to punish. In the case of murder, there are two types of reparations: one negative and the other positive, which is a substitute for the first. Either the injured group takes the life of a member of the aggressor’s group ( $A \rightarrow B-/B \rightarrow A-$  type transfer), or it accepts material compensation ( $A \rightarrow B-/A \rightarrow B+$  type transfer). For deaths occurring during territorial disputes between groups, the theft of livestock, or matrimonial disputes, a compensation scale is used as a basis for an agreement by which the injured party renounces the right to retaliate in return for the payment of blood money (Verdier 1963).

## Political Transfers, *Sensu Lato*

The practice of gifting essentially falls into the political domain in that it imparts social value to the giver and thus secures his or her place in society. Both highly political ceremonies and various customs that involve gifts, such as the gifts offered at weddings, may be included in this category, although grave goods are somewhat artificially included. Placing material goods in a grave is not necessarily linked to the belief in an afterlife that is organized like the world of the living, in which the deceased would need his or her property. The personal effects of the deceased may

indeed be left with him or her simply because it is unthinkable that someone else would use them. The various rights of condemnation surrounding certain grave goods reflect this (Gallay 2010b).

## Religious Transfers

The relationships between mankind and the sacred may be added to the model, to the extent that these relationships involve movable objects. A distinction must be made here between the offering and the sacrifice (Testart 2006); an offering is a gift to the gods, or something given to the gods in order to be enjoyable or useful to them. It is thus the transfer of a good that implies the renunciation of all rights to it, particularly the right to require anything in return. Reciprocation is not a condition for an offering, but one may always request it and pray for it (Alain Testart, personal communication). The offering allows for a certain liberty of the actor *vis-à-vis* the act and often involves goods of little value, but occasionally prestige goods as well.

The sacrifice is a type of *offering* involving its destruction or removal from use. This practice is similar to third-type transfers, in that it may involve movable prestige goods but can also involve livestock or even human beings as well. Livestock is often merely a substitute for human beings (Dieterlen 1941) (Fig. 1.10).

In summary, a prestige good results from the deliberate subtraction of wealth from the network of commercial exchanges and the daily, seasonal, or annual cycle of production-consumption. This action thus prevents the gradual loss of their value due to the introduction of new objects into the economic system via production or exchange. Prestige goods may thus be removed from commercial circuits at any time in order to be added to the social, political, or religious spheres. Conversely, they may also lose these connotations in order to enter or re-enter the realm of strictly commercial transactions. In the first case, the object loses its value in use, in the economic and technical sense of the term, and acquires a value as a sign; in the second, it loses its value as a sign in order to recover its value in use.

## Test on Anthropological Examples

8. (P8) - The Guro (Ivory Coast) have wealth that involves prestige goods.
9. (P9) - The kingships of the forest regions have prestige goods of conspicuous value.

One model may have two functions. On the upstream side, i.e., that of mechanisms, the model paves the way for understanding factors that explain the structure. In the social domain, and per Durkheim's formula (Durkheim 1895), these factors must be researched while accounting for all of the social facts that justify the structuring of the model. On the downstream side, the model may be included in the historical understanding of specific scenarios.

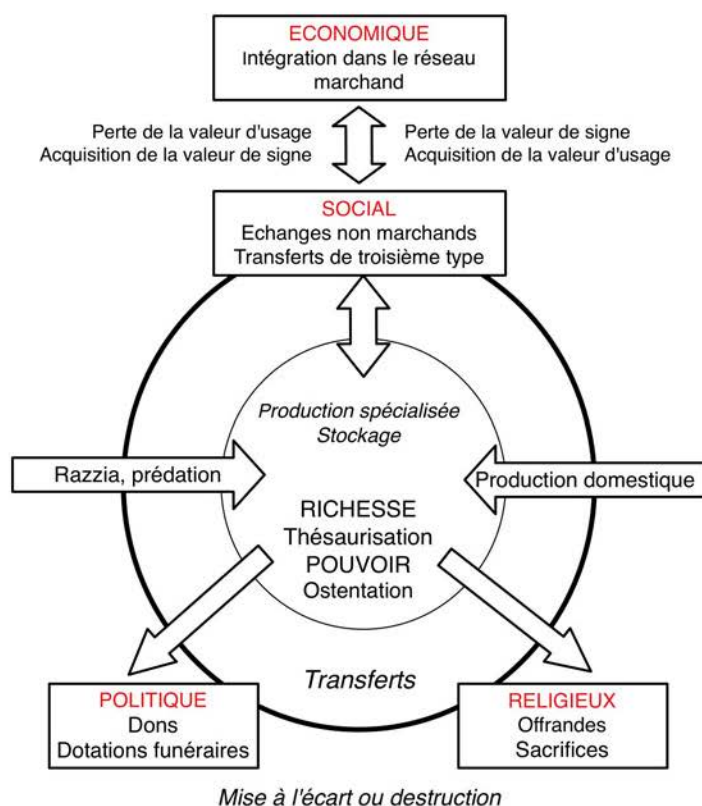


Fig. 1.10 A model for the concept of prestige good

In this field, the retained “prestige good” model may be tested on two specific African societies, the Guro in the Ivory Coast and the royal societies of the forest areas (Benin, Abomey). This evaluation allows for illustrating the model’s relevance.

## *The Guro*

In the 1950s, the Guro of the Ivory Coast, who have been well-studied in the realm of economics by Claude Meillassoux (1964), were a segmented, patrilineal, acephalous society composed of a series of lineages grouped into tribes. Authority was established on the basis of patriarchy. The relative wealth of certain patriarchs assured some of them dominant political positions. They may be considered as representative of a *proto-chiefdom* despite their inclusion within the network of international markets crossing West Africa (Fig. 1.11).

The examination of the circulation of goods among the Guro allows for identifying three large groups that include ordinary goods, wealth goods, and prestige goods.

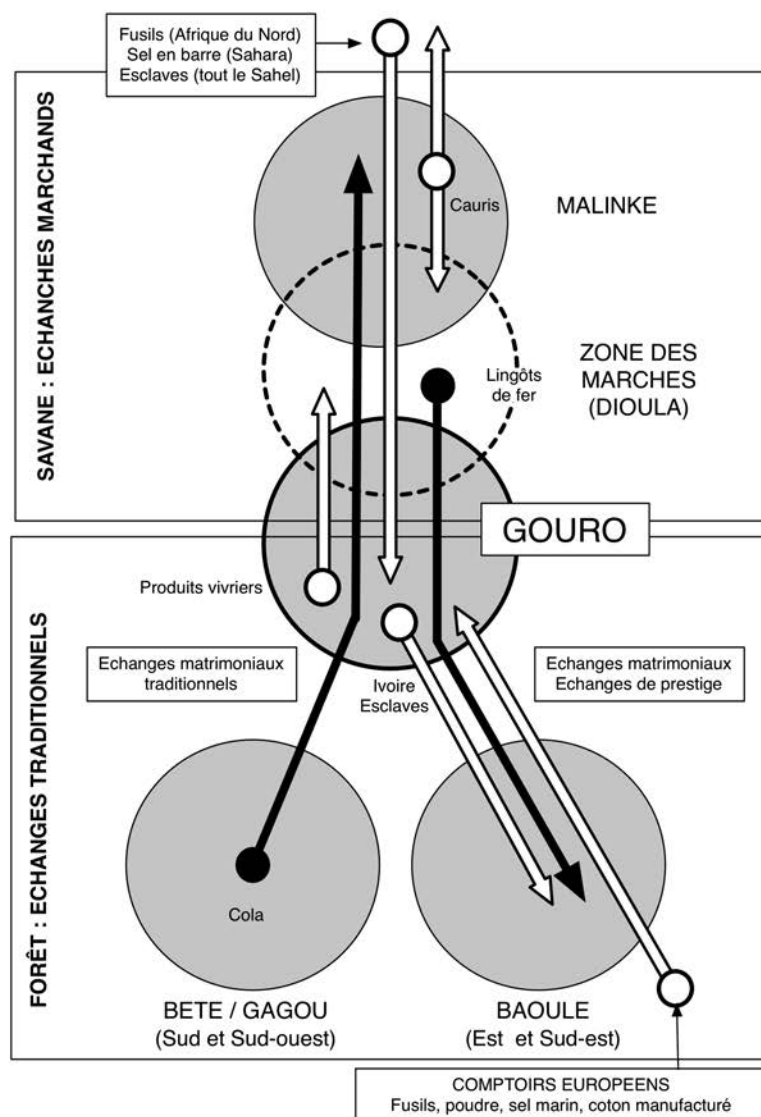


Fig. 1.11 Positions of Guro societies in the Ivory Coast in the International Commercial Network in West Africa

A single category of goods could belong to one or several of these categories, depending on the method of transfer. The prestige goods category is included in the wealth category and is primarily concerned with goods included in matrimonial transactions.

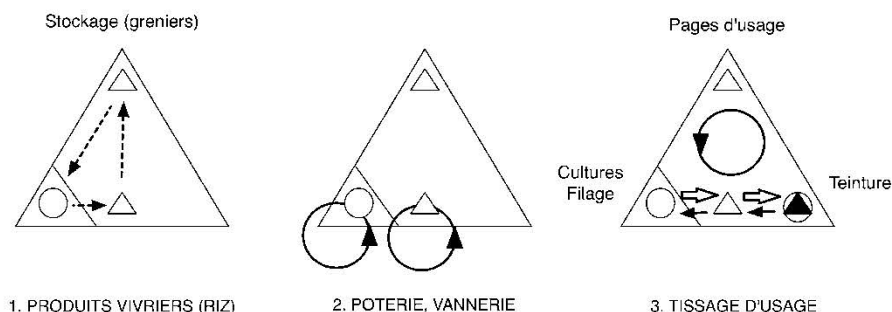
The diagram in Fig. 1.15 and Table 1.2 allow for distinguishing between the five main groups.



**Table 1.2** Guro (Côte d'Ivoire). Categorization of the objects subject to various types of transfers

	No exchange Free internal circulation	Intra- community circulation	Services	Distribution	Extra- community exchanges	Commercial exchanges	Matrimonial exchanges	Grave goods	Sacrifices	No circulation Trophies
Group 1	X									
	Pottery, basketry, rope									
	Bolts of cloth for use	X	(X)	(X)						
	Rice	X	X	X						
	Wooden boxes	X	(X)	(X)	X					
Group 2										
	Iron	X	X	X	X	X	X			
	Bolts of cloth for exchange	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
	Ivory		X			X	X			
	Guns			X		X	X			
	Oxen			X		X	X	X	X	
Group 3	Salt, kola			X		X				
Group 4	Traded slaves					X				
Group 5	War slaves						X			X
	Prestige cloth						X	X		
	Heads									X

## CIRCULATION DES PRODUITS ECONOMIQUES CHEZ LES GOURO



**Fig. 1.12** Guro. Circulation of common ordinary goods in the lineage-based community (*triangles*)

### Group 1: Exclusive Community Goods

Exclusive community goods circulate within the community, either freely or in the form of service-redistribution, and are not included in commercial circulation. Service-redistribution-type transfers involve neither wealth nor prestige goods and are thus situated outside of the model presented in this paper.

Other goods, cloth, wooden boxes, pottery, basketry, and rope constitute local products made either by everyone or by specialists within the community. They may therefore circulate freely or be included in service-redistribution channels that are managed by the elders.

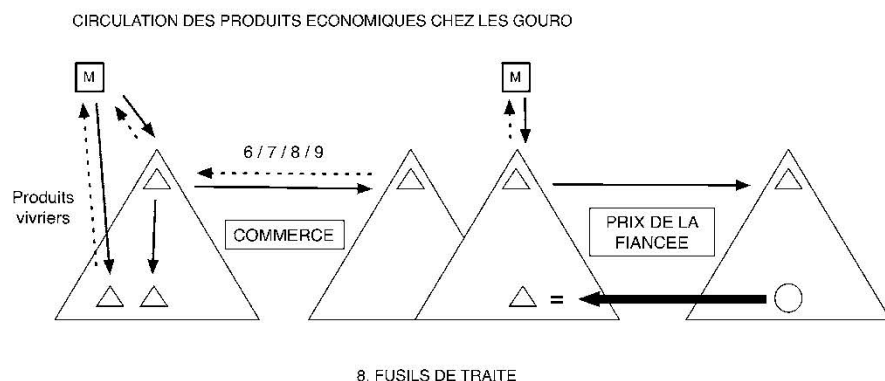
Rice, the primary food resource, occupies a special position. It is stocked by the elders for the use of the community and redistributed for daily consumption. Meillassoux claims that it is never hoarded. However, it seems difficult not to concede that a surplus would not be included in commercial and non-commercial exchanges in order to obtain certain goods, a practice that is common in West Africa (Fig. 1.12).

### Group 2: Community Wealth Also Acting as Commercial and Prestige Goods

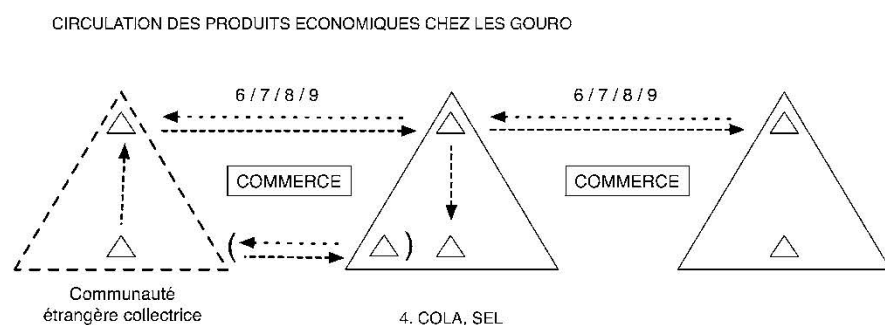
Group 2 includes local or commercial goods that are included in community channels but that may also function as prestige objects in matrimonial transactions. Certain products, such as guns and iron ingots, are acquired in markets; others, such as livestock, loincloth with exchange value, and ivory, are local (Fig. 1.13).

### Group 3: Local or Commercial Community Wealth

Commercial goods may be included in community channels. Certain unprocessed foreign goods, such as kola nuts or salt, are acquired in markets and make up a primary form of wealth on the community scale (Fig. 1.14).



**Fig. 1.13** Transfers involving guns



**Fig. 1.14** Guro. Commercial circulation of kola nuts and salt

#### Group 4: Goods Acting Solely as Commercial Wealth

This group involves goods that only have commercial value. The only good that fits into this category is slaves, the number of which increased during the development of the Transatlantic slave trade, notably during the Mandingo Wars.

#### Group 5: Exclusive Prestige Goods

Group 5 includes goods that only have a function of prestige. It includes goods produced locally by elders, such as prestige cloth, as well as the spoils of war, slaves, and severed heads. Some of these goods, such as prestige loincloth or potential slaves, are included in matrimonial transactions (Figs. 1.15, 1.16 and 1.17).

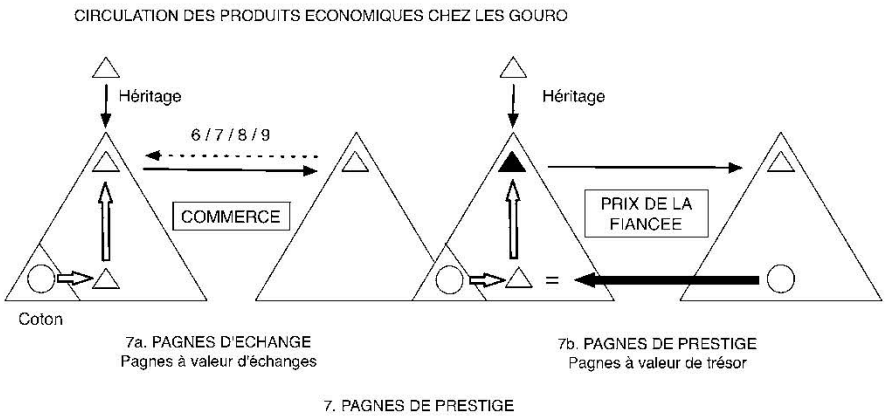


Fig. 1.15 Transfers including bolts of cloth with exchange value and treasured loincloth

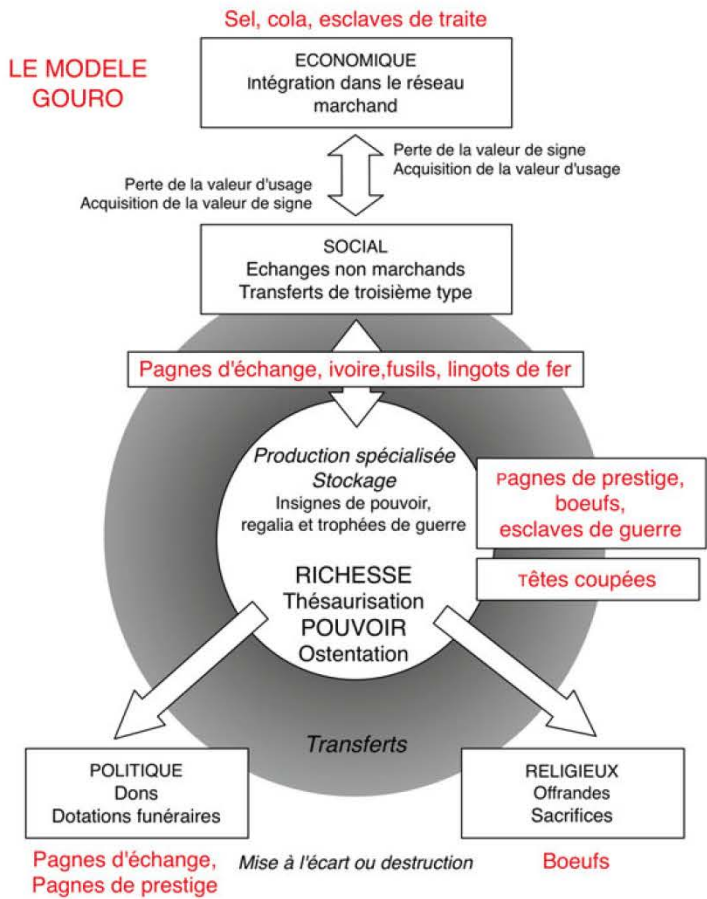
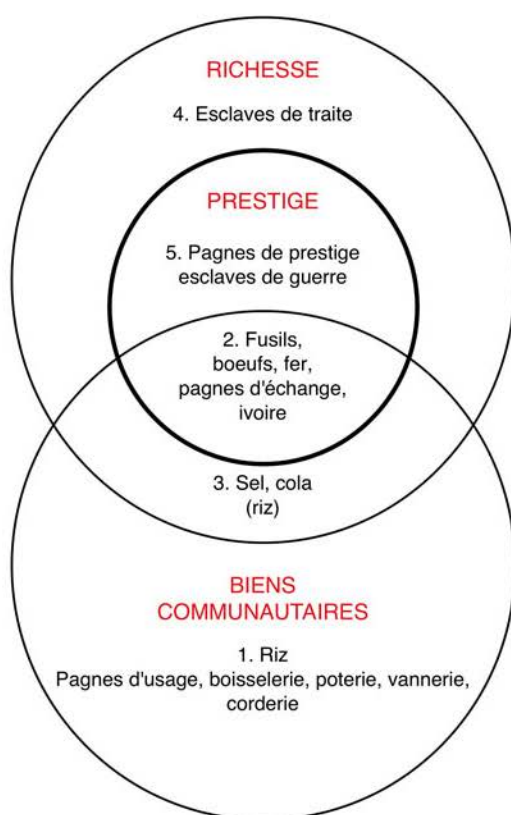


Fig. 1.16 Guro. Location of various categories of goods in the prestige goods model



Fig. 1.17 Guro. Functions of various goods in wealth



### *The Forest Kingdoms*

The kingdoms of the forest areas belong to divine kingships in our classification. They allow us to address the issue of prestige goods with an ostentatious connotation that will only be retained here. The examples in this section are taken from the Edo Kingdom of the Benin Empire (in present-day Nigeria) (Garrard 1989; Plankensteiner 2007) and the Yoruba Kingdom in Abomey (present-day Benin) (Forbes 1851; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1964).

Four groups may be distinguished here, only the latter two of which are of interest to this paper and are therefore explained in detail.

#### **Group 1: Exclusive Community Goods**

This first group is only mentioned for the record. It is worth remembering that the region is primarily one of tuber cultivation where palm oil plays an important role.

## Group 2: Local or Commercial Community Wealth

Sea salt and kola nuts, two locally produced goods that are likely to be exchanged at longer (kola nuts) or shorter (sea salt) distances, may have played a role in defining wealth, as with the Guro.

## Group 3: Goods Acting as Commercial Wealth

In the former Benin Empire (present-day Nigeria), primary wealth was made up of slaves who essentially had commercial value. The hunting and capturing of slaves was indeed an important cornerstone of the kingdom's economy. The primary reason for wartime raids on neighboring populations appears to not have been territorial conquest, but rather to capture slaves.

*Shackles* functioned as *primitive currencies* and may have been considered a form of wealth.

- They had small dimensions and made up, when gathered in greater numbers, quantities that were divisible in accounting activities.
- They served as a standard of value or of measurement.
- They may have been subject to hoarding and thus had value as a sign.
- They could have been a raw material for handicrafts and therefore had value in use.

They were primarily bracelets made of copper or a copper–zinc alloy that were produced in Europe, notably in England (Birmingham or Liverpool) and in France (Nantes) and introduced to the African coast by the Portuguese. Access to shackles was controlled by the elite and the sovereign, who maintained their exclusivity. These currencies could nonetheless have functioned as prestige goods in certain contexts and even have had conspicuous value, as these brass bas-reliefs portraying Portuguese holding shackles show.

## Group 4: Ostentatious Prestige Goods

In the Benin Empire, ostentatious goods involved what is called *regalia*, as well as trophy heads obtained through acts of war. All objects resulting from artisanal production in the royal court may be included under the term *regalia*. The artisans working for the king were grouped into guilds connected to the palace and involved artisan melters, blacksmiths, weavers, wood and ivory sculptors, jewelers, and tanners. Most often, the artisans were not allowed to work for people other than chiefs and the palace, and it was forbidden for them to sell their products in markets.

Brass plaques are the best known ostentatious goods. Objects dedicated to the sovereign and placed on ancestral altars may also be mentioned, notably brass representations of the sovereign's head in which meticulously crafted elephant tusks had been inserted. These altars in the palace ensure the legitimization of the sovereign based on his relationship with his ancestors. The lineage-based and gerontocratic

principles that were applied to the sanctuary played an important role in the makeup of the kingship.

To the extent that it can be evaluated from the available evidence, trophy heads from acts of war do not seem to have played an important role among the ostentatious objects in the Benin Empire, contrary to the situation observed in Abomey. However, there is a brass plaque that shows a building, either a palace or sanctuary, whose door frame is decorated with the heads of Portuguese soldiers (recognizable by their hats and beards), a depiction where it is difficult not to consider them as trophy heads. And yet this image collides with the popular vision that emphasizes essentially commercial and peaceful relationships between the Portuguese and the Africans, which is furthermore illustrated by other plaques.

Two customs involving human beings may fall under the category of “prestige.” The first involves the institution of crown slaves, in which slaves are enlisted in administration and war. The second involves matrimonial customs and polygamy. Women could be offered as a gift to important chiefs, particularly the king, who could make them his wives. It is worth noting that the women who were offered were not slaves, but chiefs’ daughters or well-born girls. Data on the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin) allow for completing this overview, particularly in the domain of “human goods” with ostentatious value.

“Customs” were celebrations generally dedicated to ancestors and particularly to the sovereign. These “Grand Customs,” meant to glorify the sovereign, were celebrated over several weeks after the death of the reigning king, after an interregnum of two years that was dedicated to preparing for the celebration before the definitive crowning of the crown prince. “Annual Customs” were anniversaries celebrated in honor of all of the ancestors and dedicated more specifically to the previous king. These celebrations were occasions for the ostentatious presentation of goods and trophies, the squandering of wealth, and human and animal sacrifices, and the court became wealthier thanks to the taxes imposed on the population and through gifts.

The goal of the Customs was to glorify the king. It was during these Grand Customs, and because they took place, that the designated heir received confirmation of his power, which had been held by the same line for several generations. As for Annual Customs, their goal was to periodically strengthen the monarchy by reaffirming the permanence of ancestral links: the dynasty ensured that it continued to exist and that, ever-powerful, it had given itself a successor whose “name” was not less prestigious than that of the deceased.

The Customs were the occasion to display and squander the wealth of the sovereign. The “Display of the King’s Wealth” took place three times per Custom. This display called for the king to take out of his warehouses everything that he and his predecessors had stockpiled and, for more than 12 h, several thousand Amazons and warriors wandered the city, carrying, dragging, or pushing his treasures, an incongruous grouping of goods including spoils of war, diplomatic gifts, traded goods, etc.

Customs were also occasions for sacrificing prisoners of war. Kings struggled during these occasions to strike a balance between needing to keep slaves alive for their commercial value and the ostentatious display of human sacrifices. In fact, the

number of killings was limited by the constraints of the trade, which is an excellent example of the tensions that could exist between ostentatious practices and commercial concerns. Human sacrifices actually liquidated the surplus of prisoners that could not be sold.

The displaying of severed heads completed the pattern of ostentation. The heads could come from sacrifices that would be accompanied, exceptionally and marginally, by cannibalism. They could also come directly from the battlefield, since the king usually purchased trophy heads from warriors who were returning from combat.

To finish the practice of sacrifices, “accompanying dead” are mentioned here, i.e., a type of “grave good” where people are sacrificed after the death of an important figure to escort him or her to the afterlife. In this society, it was a privilege reserved for the sovereign. The deceased king needed to enter his new domain as a king, accompanied by a court of women, Amazons, wives, ministers and seers, bards and soldiers, and representatives of various professions. Such was the goal of sacrifices. Royal spouses argued over the honor of following the king to the grave: there were 85 deceased spouses in 1774 after the death of Tegnassou and 595 in 1789 after the death of Kpengla IV (Figs. 1.18 and 1.19).

### *Consequences for Archaeological Practices*

10. (P10) - The ambiguity of the relationships between the objects’ intrinsic criteria and functional interpretations requires new reflection on the objects’ contexts of discovery.

The anthropological evaluation of certain concepts used by archaeologists frequently demonstrates that no one-to-one link exists between objects defined by their intrinsic characteristics and their economic, social, political, or ideological interpretations. The case of the concept of prestige goods is an excellent example of this situation. One way to respond to this difficulty involves considering the multiple interpretations of a material phenomenon as a fundamental characteristic of the archaeological approach and to include it in writings in the form of alternative interpretations.

It is nevertheless also worth ending the anthropological analysis of one concept with a reflection about what the concepts mean in a material sense. If the intrinsic data are often ambiguous, perhaps certain contextual archaeological data would allow for resolving these ambiguities, such as taphonomic data about the objects’ conditions of discovery, restricted spatial data, wide geographic data, etc.

The fact that reflecting on these questions at the end of the analysis is necessary reveals a significant gap in the ethnological evidence utilized. In fact, this evidence remains poor in terms of contextual data of this type. This type of data would be extremely useful to archaeologists. The situation justifies an ethnoarchaeological approach that is sensitive to these contextual data.



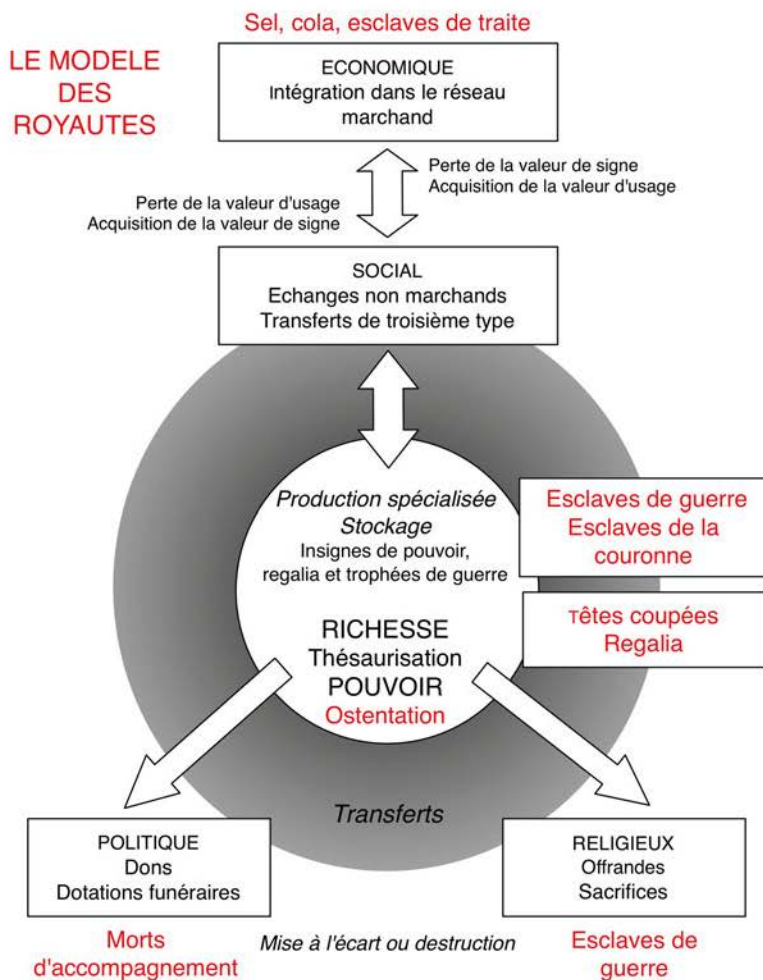


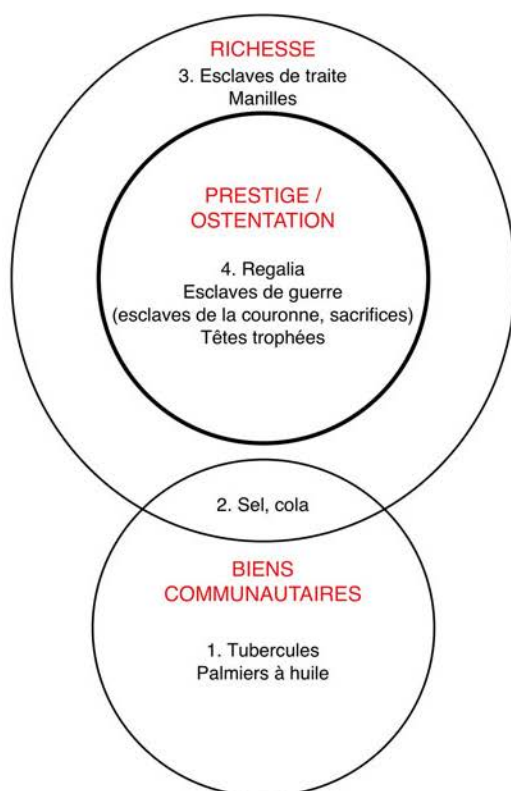
Fig. 1.18 The forest kingdoms. Location of various categories of goods in the prestige goods model

In the case presented here, the usable contextual data remain limited and the cases that are mentioned are only given as an example of possible reflection.

### Geographical Distribution

A wide geographical distribution over all of West Africa of a type of object whose origin is known may be significant to the questions posed. This type of distribution is probably related to international commerce, the sources of which could be Maghreb for objects of Arab or Saharan origin, or the ports and trading posts on the

Fig. 1.19 The forest kingdoms. Functions of various goods in wealth



Atlantic coast for objects relating to Transatlantic trade. Although objects of this type are often a part of wealth, they do not necessarily become prestige goods and might only be considered commodities.

### Topographical Distribution

Data on village-scale granaries are interesting for the distribution of wealth in families, but this must be combined with the study of dwellings. Accounting for granaries' dimensions may provide an appreciation for the volume that was kept. The concentration of objects in granaries may be related to the wealth of the elders, but the objects in question could be commodities as much as prestige goods.

The information gleaned from the link between certain precious objects and the structures of palaces is more precise. It provides a correlation that could allow for an interpretation like ostentatious prestige goods produced, stored, and consumed on the scale of the palace. The presence of crafts people's studios within the palace may be considered an important element for discussion.

## Presence in Tombs

The presence of an object in a tomb does not automatically make it a prestige good, since common, ordinary goods could be placed in tombs. The condemnation of certain objects (weapons that had been folded, perforated pottery) could be linked to the concept of the offering, but the ethnographic information on this question remains sparse. On the other hand, the offering might only involve ordinary goods.

The issue of “accompanying dead” poses a difficult problem as well. First, it is necessary to evaluate the number of people who died. An individual who was killed does not have the same meaning as the massacre of several dozen people. As far as we can tell, this practice involved the relatives of the deceased but also prisoners of war and slaves. Killing them evoked the wealth and power of the deceased. Apparently, this practice appears as early as segmented proto-state societies (Senegambian megaliths) and decreases in state societies with the institution of crown slaves. However, this practice increases under divine kingships and was likely limited to the king and possibly to members of the aristocracy.

## Conclusions

This article has outlined several difficulties linked to the functional interpretation of archaeological remains that will need to be reflected upon in the future. Concepts used at the anthropological level need to be better defined. This requires trans-cultural approaches, a better evaluation of the place of actors’ discourse in this semantic process, and proposals on the cultural contextualization of observations.

At the archaeological level, we see that the link between functional interpretations and the intrinsic characteristics of objects often remains explicitly ambiguous in our work.

Finally, at the ethnoarchaeological level, work must be done to master contextual, taphonomic, and spatial data better, which is the only way to reduce the ambiguities of the interpretations.

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