

How Many Things Does Man Need? Material Possessions and Consumption in Three West African Villages (Hausa, Kasena and Tuareg) Compared to German Students

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In contrast to many other anthropological studies of consumption this paper focuses on material possessions and consumption in rural environments in West Africa. The empirical data are based on comparative research in West African village households including a comparison to German student households. The samples from West Africa show the following similarities: people do not possess more than 100-130 things. The differences between the African case studies concern mainly the value and origin of things. The households of Kel Ewey Tuareg in Timia (Niger) show significantly more valuable possessions than the others in Niger (Berberkia, Hausa) and Burkina (Kollo, Kasena). Moreover in Timia the share of valuable objects made by craftspeople is bigger than in the other villages. The reason is a higher sensitivity for local traditions in a tribal society like Timia compared with peasant societies like Berberkia and Kollo.

Considering the investigated households in Germany, the number of objects per person is ten times higher than in West Africa (this holds even more for children). The significant quantitative difference can only to a small degree be explained by poverty. It is rather due to a different structure of the material possessions: In German households the categories of objects are for a number of reasons present in a multiplicity of items: fashions, need for an everyday change of dress and meals, different goods for different occasions, and so on.