

interesting questions, but answering them requires that we look beyond missionary rhetoric.

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POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF MUSLIM LEADERS IN GHANA

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Between Accommodation and Revivalism: Muslims, the State, and Society in Ghana from the Precolonial to the Postcolonial Era. By HOLGER WEISS. Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2008. Pp. 439. €30 paperback (ISBN 978-951-9380-71-1).

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The history of Muslims in Ghana attracted a great deal of attention during the years immediately following independence. Researchers, many affiliated with the Institute of African Studies at Legon, managed in less than a decade to create a rich scholarship based primarily on Arabic texts, other precolonial documents, and the official histories of chiefs and the ‘ulamā’. After a period of relative neglect, when only a handful of historians showed interest, a new generation, including Sulemana Mumuni, Rev. Nathan Samwini, and Ousman Kobo, has recently produced more sociological and cultural analyses, relying largely on oral histories of non-elites. In the present volume, Holger Weiss offers a wide-ranging account of the political strategies of Muslim leaders that builds on both generations of scholarship while itself drawing heavily on colonial archives. Although the incorporation of Ghanaian Muslims within the structures of indirect rule has been studied in pieces by James Dretke, Enid Schildkrout, Deborah Pellow, and David Skinner, Weiss provides the first comprehensive narrative of this process and of the persistence of these basic structures into the postcolonial period. For Anglophone readers he performs the further service of synthesizing recent German scholarship and German-language archives.

Studies of West African Muslims have long made use of a ‘stagist’ model in which minority populations cycle through being ‘quarantined’ from host populations to ‘mixing’ with them to ‘reforming’ or purifying their practices to restore internal cohesion. Weiss argues that in Ghana several factors promoted a greater-than-usual emphasis on mixture and accommodation for most of the last four centuries. The region’s Muslims were committed to a ‘Suwarian’ tradition that rejected both conflict with non-Muslims and aggressive proselytization. For their part, non-Muslim elites found many of the skills – literacy, spiritual capital, trade networks – offered by Muslims sufficiently valuable to tolerate their presence, albeit often grudgingly. Regional variations largely reflected the relative strength of Asante influence: in the north, Muslim scholars typically exercised real social authority and constituted a source of political power distinct from (if subordinate to) non-Muslim chiefs; closer to Kumasi, Muslims were better integrated into ruling structures and thus less autonomous. Insulated from the *jihadi* stirrings in Sokoto, this situation persisted on the broadest level from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, with colonial rule and the postcolonial state simply constituting powerful entities to be accommodated. On a smaller scale, however, European rule resulted in more instances of both segregation and purification. After brief

flirtations with Nigeria-style pro-Islamic policies – driven by the conviction that Islam, if inferior to Christianity, was at least preferable to ‘indigenous’ beliefs – both the Germans in Togoland and the British elsewhere adopted a more skeptical attitude in the face of resistance movements led by religious figures. The British, in particular, supported Muslim leaders in areas where they might facilitate indirect rule – the so-called chiefly groups – and preferred to support Christian missionization in more decentralized areas and in Asante. In the chiefly areas, this resulted in a segregation of Muslim ‘officials’ from the cultural roles that had facilitated gradual ‘Islamization’, while in other areas it reinforced the fragile position of Muslims as ‘strangers’. In an environment of increasing literacy, improved communications technology, and growing national identity, both dynamics resulted in emerging ‘Muslim spheres’ – discursive and institutional spaces distinct from surrounding society, in which ‘Muslimness’ was the defining criterion. The hallmarks of this process were the formalization of the ‘*zongos*’ (segregated neighborhoods with separate administrative linkages) and the marginalization of Muslim educational organizations within the broader socio-economic order. The mass political mobilization that began after 1945 had little impact other than to ensure that an independent Ghana would inherit a highly depoliticized set of administrative apparatuses for managing an often-impoorished minority. Growing internal divisions – between Sufi and anti-Sufi activists, along ethnic lines, and so forth – resulted only in minor perturbations in the networks of dependency tying Muslims to the developmentalist state.

Although the outside-in optic begs some questions – why the Suwarian tradition was so durable; why reformists ranging from early Mahdist resisters to more recent Wahhabi-style modernizers were able to mobilize popular support only at certain moments; how meaningful the ‘Muslim sphere’ analogy to Weberian models of ‘public spheres’ is – the amount of detail marshaled to support the analysis is impressive. By weaving together precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial processes, it presents the recent past as the product of robust, internal dynamics in which religious and cultural values play a causal role. It thus offers an alternative to the ‘colonial’ lens through which most African history continues to be seen, helping place the burgeoning literature on colonial intermediaries within a longer, more African-centered story. Somewhat frustratingly, it achieves this effect by, as Weiss acknowledges, treating a wide range of issues – from forms of devotional practice to local politics, from doctrinal disputes to labor migration – as part of a single coherent story centered on religious identity. This places a burden on the book’s organization and occasionally reinforces a widespread difficulty with histories of Muslim peoples in which sociological matters are historicized while religious beliefs and norms are substantive givens. Weiss is alert to these problems, frequently offering insights into the way in which Muslimness was constructed by outside observers and recognizing that Muslims’ relations with non-Muslims and with political authorities were not usually the most important aspects of their lives. Without more of an internal voice, however, it is difficult to avoid taking administrative categories for lived ones.

In the end, Weiss has written a first-rate institutional history. The new generation of Ghanaian scholars is making clear that the data are available for histories of gender and age relations, cultural logics, intellectual beliefs, materiality, and quotidian practices among Ghanaian Muslims, and such studies should and will receive increasing attention. But, insofar as colonial documents will remain key sources and relations with the state a key theme, Weiss’s work will provide crucial, and perhaps definitive, context.

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