

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Wyatt MacGaffey. *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. xii + 227 pp. Photographs. Maps. Appendix. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$37.50. Cloth and Ebook.

Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers offers a look inside the decades-long disputes between chiefs and fetish priests (*tindanas*) in Northern Ghana concerning the claims to, and limits of, traditional authority in the modern nation-state. These arguments are frequently centered on rights to the sale and allocation of land. Both chiefs and *tindanas* base their claims to power on historical precedent, but as Wyatt MacGaffey shows, the historical narratives are multiple, contingent, frequently contradictory, and generally taken as gospel truth by those in a position to benefit from one or another account. As many Dagbamba publicly call for the preservation of their culture amidst rapidly advancing development and modernization, people have been looking increasingly to their oral history to point a way forward. But which history?

The book is a sustained critique of both the written and oral archives regarding the reification of Dagbamba tradition, and shows the effects of the manipulation of historical narratives for both “traditional” and popular culture in Ghana. MacGaffey conducted his research a few months at a time, every year from 1996 to 2010. Any drawbacks of not having one or more extended research periods in “the field” have been more than made up for by a sustained relationship with the people and places of the Northern Region. The result is a meticulously researched, forcefully argued, and expertly crafted ethnography touching on matters of “tradition,” the Dagbamba chieftaincy crisis, the place of chieftaincy in modern Ghana, and ultimately the control of land and resources in the Fourth Republic.

MacGaffey offers new insights into the supposed distinctions between chief and fetish priest, and between conqueror and conquered. He argues that the ruling Dagbamba chiefs, as well as neighboring Mamprussi, Nanumba, and Mossi, emerged organically from the population of the Volta Basin, rather than arriving as conquerors from the East, as their oral historians tell them. This last distinction is a crucial one, with political and

economic ramifications in the local as well as national arenas, and has been at the root of more than one civil war.

Among the main contributions of *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers* are the correctives offered regarding Dagbamba history, practice, and authority. Much of what has been written, especially regarding chieftaincy and “tradition,” dates from the early colonial period and is shot through with inaccuracies and misunderstandings. For example, it has been accepted since the earliest days of colonial anthropology that chiefs were the strictly political leaders of conquering states and that fetish priests were the strictly religious leaders of the conquered, acephalous societies. Through a detailed listing of the sacred esoterica of several chieftaincies and earth shrines, MacGaffey debunks these assumptions, showing that in precolonial Dagbon many of these positions apparently carried both religious and political functions and that today the differences between these offices have mostly disappeared. In fact, many tindanas are referred to as “naas,” have their own praise-singers, and wear the robes, hats, and other regalia associated with chieftaincy. Focusing on the economics of traditional authority, he argues that the main duties of both offices have become the sale and management of land.

Another important argument put forward is that precolonial Dagbon was never actually a single, unified political unit under the jurisdiction of a paramount chief. The British district commissioners believed the rules of “traditional” authority to be both clear-cut and absolute, and both chiefs and tindanas had much to gain by convincing them that this was in fact the case. MacGaffey tracks the political wranglings dating from the colonial period and through successive independence governments that created and later solidified the chiefs’ and tindanas’ positions as official owners of land in Northern Ghana.

There is little to quibble with in this excellent work, but one wishes that MacGaffey had made different choices regarding orthography. Like many African languages, written Dagbanli suffers from a lack of standardization, and MacGaffey gets those of us writing on northern Ghana no closer to agreement. For example, he largely eschews the practice of representing long and raised vowel sounds with double vowels, and he uses the common yet erroneous “Dagbani” in place of “Dagbanli” to refer to the language of the Dagbamba.

Like many fine works in African studies, the scope of *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers* is part historical and part ethnographic, with each approach informing the other. MacGaffey unpacks the bases of contemporary land disputes in northern Ghana, critiques the claims to political legitimacy by the actors involved, and shows the results of these disputes at the national and local levels. This work has much to offer students of oral tradition, and the importance of this work for scholars of history and culture in Ghana cannot be overstated.

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