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T. C. McCaskie. *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ix + 492 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-41009-0.

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Perpetuating Power: Politics and Belief in 18th and 19th Century Asante

Precolonial Asante has the distinction of being one of the most studied societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Its size (covering much of the west African country of Ghana) and its location (within the first sub-Saharan African country to obtain its independence from a European colonial power) attracted the attention of both scholars and politicians during the heady days of decolonization when so many were interested in countering the image of African history as the history of Europeans in Africa.

Asante presented an especially appealing opportunity to counter these images: it was organized as a functioning state system well before European colonialism; its history was more easily recovered than others because of the extensive documentation about the state in both oral traditions as well as in European trade and traveler accounts; its history and culture were associated with that most dazzling of metals, gold.

Throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, interest in Asante generated an impressive body of scholarship unmatched elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of southern Africa. Scholars published innumerable articles and at least seven major book-length studies on virtually every aspect of Asante political and economic culture. They examined the history of particular political elites (both men and women), Asante bureaucratic structures and economic systems, their relations with various European powers and associations with other African societies far and near.

This early interest in Asante political and economic history and the good fortune of having excellent oral and documentary sources on those particular areas of Asante history became a trap from which few scholars were able to escape, however. Study after study focused almost exclusively on the political and the economic elite. Interest in other areas–Asante belief systems, reconstructing the life of the average citizen, male and female–lost out to the political and the economic. McCaskie's study of eighteenth and nineteenth century simultaneously fits into and breaks with this historiographical tradition.

Beginning with a series of articles that he began publishing in the early 1980s, McCaskie combined an analysis of the history of power in Asante (the most common subject of analysis in Asante historiography) with ground-breaking studies of 19th-century social life and belief systems. Such titles as "State and Society, Marriage and Adultery", (*Journal of African History*, 22, 477), "Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History", (*Africa*, 53, 1) and "Komfo Anokye of Asante: Meaning, History and Philosophy in an African Society" (*Journal of African History* ,27) signaled McCaskie's intention to break, at least in part, with the historiographical past and to chart a new path for Asante history by combining an analysis of power with social history and political thought. His study, *State and Society in Precolonial Asante* is the culmination of this effort. It is innovative, at times quite brilliant and yet not without a number of troubling problems.

As he notes in the introduction of this book, McCaskie seeks to challenge what he sees as the disfiguring of Asante history. He argues (with some justification) that key studies on Asante have reduced the history of this state to the study of its political elite. Local belief systems and the particular patterns of Asante thought are ignored. The active elements within the state and society are reduced in these studies to what McCaskie terms "crude materialism," the simple pursuit of power. He focuses most of his attack on the works of I. Wilks (*Asante in the 19th Century*, 1975), who uses a Weberian model of European bureaucracy to explain the nature of state and society relations in Asante. According to McCaskie, Wilks' effort is a "disfigurement" of Asante history because it is based on an uncritical application of a European model that fails to elucidate the African character of Asante history and culture.

McCaskie challenges this so-called "disfigurement" by using an "enlarged and refined" Gramscian concept of

hegemony to explain how the Asante state obtained the consent of the ruled by constructing and propagating a way of thinking that ensured not only the continued rule of the political elite, but also the uncritical acceptance by all of a particular construct about the proper ordering of Asante society, the state and individual action. In Chapter Two, for example, McCaskie analyzes the historical development and propagation of an ethic in precolonial Asante that emphasized accumulation, first in food stuffs and later in people and financial wealth. He then documents with a series of biographical notes, the notion that between the eighteenth and nineteenth century this evolving system of accumulation "favoured and benefited the Kumase office-holders at the expense of the remainder of Asante society" (p. 72).

In Chapter Three, McCaskie discusses the way in which the state structured, participated in and manipulated the discourse around kinship and religious beliefs to regulate social and political relations. Of principle concern is the seeming paradox in which an economically egalitarian segmentary lineage system and a ritually powerful priesthood could continue to exist within a state which had come to rely increasingly on "unilateral impositions of power" (p. 77). McCaskie argues that these two systems were, indeed, kept in operation simultaneously but within a system in which the state determined who was an Asante (by holding out the absolute value of being granted such an identity, especially for the larger slave population) and by keeping the priesthood marginalized.

Chapter Four focuses on the Asante *odwira*, a harvest festival that, as performance, served to commemorate the Asante state as an entity that was, is and always would be. Odwira encouraged reflection on the nature of what it meant to be an Asante; it celebrated the state as symbolized by the Asante king; it regulated the new-season yam crop and symbolically managed the transformation of Asante from a state of defilement to a state of purity as part of the celebration of a new year. Underlying all this ritualized symbolic activity was an overriding emphasis on the power and centrality of the state to Asante civil society.

Throughout these four chapters, McCaskie skillfully, and at times, brilliantly combines methodologies used more commonly by symbolic anthropologists with a sensitive and deeply knowledgeable use of court cases and biographical information to illustrate the complex workings of Asante society. In this regard, his study stands as a model of interdisciplinary research. It combines historical and anthropological methodologies, literary techniques of textual analysis with a clear sense of how to use European theoretical models (in this case, Gramsci) in ways that do not overshadow the realities of precolonial African history and culture, but give priority to an African view of the African past. His discussion of Odwira in Chapter Four is particularly innovative and enlightening, and should serve as a model for the analysis of publicly performed state rituals and ceremonies.

McCaskie's study is not without its problems, however. Central to his study is the perceived conundrum that "peasant rebellion, concerted or inchoate, was not a feature of precolonial Asante history" (p. 9). This, he argues, "was the case despite the fact that the Kumase elite systematically exploited a numerically huge rural underclass–both slave and free–that could never have been held in check by repressive coercion alone" (p. 9). McCaskie's effort to resolve this riddle has led him to use Gramscian analysis to illustrate how the state uses its power to obtain, through propagation, participation and manipulation, the consent of the ruled.

But no where does McCaskie give any evidence that the Asante state was really so exploitative and onerous. Instead, he continually emphasizes throughout the text the extent to which the state apparatus, located in the capital of Kumase, operated largely in isolation from the rest of the society. Accordingly, his use of the Gramscian model–which is of great value in itself, in helping one understand how the Asante state operated–attempts to resolve a problem for the existence of which there is no evidence. We never see beyond the boundaries of Kumase. What was the life of the average peasant or slave? There are a few glimpses but not nearly enough to lend support to the thesis that this elaborate ideology so carefully and brilliantly reconstructed was actually needed to keep at bay a severely exploited rural population.

Another troubling aspect of McCaskie's analysis involves his discussion of the actions taken by those who did oppose the state. These included rebellions by provincial leaders and by some priests, the *abonsamkomfowo*. According to McCaskie, "the abonsamkomfowo located the source of all the ills of contemporary Asante in what they saw as the state's deviant and corrupt subversion of and turning away from fundamental prescriptions. That is, they held the state responsible for fatal breaches of the ideological compact that had governed Asante society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (p. 134).

McCaskie then describes the failure of the abonsamkomfowo to seriously challenge the state. He attributes this failure to two factors: a) the Asante state

consciously and assiduously maintained and refined its ability to define and control the terms by which the opposition defined itself; and b) "Asante singularly lacked certain characteristics–for example, a tradition of literacy, or a sustained exegetical theology; thus ... it had no continuous tradition of dissent grounded in the rigorous and sustained examination of alternative epistemological possibilities" (p. 23).

Never in his analysis, however, does McCaskie explain the historic conditions within Asante society that would have necessitated the development of such an alternative epistemology. Just as McCaskie fails to explore how the peasants and slaves outside of Kumase thought of the Asante state, he also does not examine the thought processes–even in a speculative way–of those who actively worked against the state. We have only the perspective of the state which wished to project an image and an ideology that supported its all encompassing power. But how was that image and ideology received? The data may be limited, but an "enlarged" and "refined" Gramscian analysis demands at least informed speculation about such matters.

More minor concerns have to do with his discussion of the scholarly works by other historians of Asante, and his rhetorical style. McCaskie identifies Ivor Wilks' 1975 text, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* as particularly worthy of attack because of its singular standing within Asante historiography. His criticisms of Wilks' bureaucratic model of the Asante political system, while certainly not completely unfounded, was a bit too vituperative. Finally, any one interested in understanding McCaskie's ground-breaking analysis of Asante society will not find this book "user friendly." The language he uses is often obtuse and needlessly obscure. Despite these concerns, his study stands as a major achievement for Asante historiography.

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