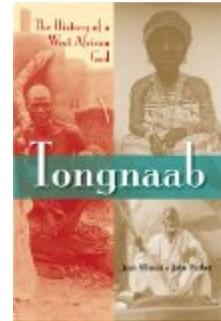


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean Allman, John Parker. *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xi + 300 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34665-0.

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Talensi

Tongnaab: The History of a West African God reinforces the importance of recognizing the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and a variety of cross cultural influences when investigating culture regardless of how structured a society might be. Yet the historical and cultural relationship of the Talensi to other Western Sudanic societies should have been explored more extensively. A considerable literature does exist on the nature of ethnicity in the Western Sudan; for example, within art history this issue has been expounded upon in the work of René Bravmann, Barbara Frank, Christopher Roy, and Patrick McNaughton. Clearly, the main focus of this book is on the interrelationship between the Talensi and the Akan peoples to the south.

In chapter 1, Allman and Parker lay out the cultural and historical landscape by examining the rise of states to the north and south of the Talensi, noting particularly the effect of the slave trade and the eighteenth-century Asante penetration into the middle Volta basin. As a result of these developments, the societies of northeastern Ghana felt the impact of both raiders and refugees, which for the Talensi resulted in a cultural split between the indigenous Tale and the Namoo. Although the Namoo, who are of Mamprussi origin, assumed a degree of political control, the Tale continue to coordinate the great festivals and manage the earth and ancestral shrines, including the Tongnaab. A regional pilgrimage network centered on the Tong hills, home of the Tongnaab, was in existence by the nineteenth century and had expanded into the Asante area by the early colonial period.

The next chapter covers the early colonial period up to the arrival of R. S. Rattray, a government anthropologist, in 1928. Rattray's *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (1932) remains a valuable resource for studying the Talensi and neighboring peoples of northeastern Ghana. The primary issues of this chapter are the impact of the colonial administration, the ongoing conflicts between local populations and the British, and the attempt by the colonial government to end ritual activity in the Tong hills.

Chapter 3 concentrates on witchcraft and anti-witchcraft movements in Ghana from the 1870s to the 1920s. It is during this time period that Tongnaab began to gain significance among the Akan in the south. The authors suggest that the rise of witchcraft concerns was a response to colonial conquest and rule. Allman and Parker discuss the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa and the early anthropological scholarship associated with it, including the work of David Tait, Jack Goody and E.E. Evans-Pritchard. The authors also utilize the approaches of more recent scholars such as Rosalind Shaw and David Baum. Specific examples in the Akan region are scrutinized along with the question of why deities from the northern areas are seen as especially effective against witchcraft. As the authors state, "The ambiguity of ethnic 'otherness'...intersected with a further ambivalence, that of the historical battle against witchcraft" (p. 141).

The rise of Nana Tongo, the southern manifestation of Tongnaab, is the focus of chapter 4. From the 1930s to the

1950s, the movement of people to the south for jobs and to the north for religious reasons changed the dynamic of ethnicity in Ghana. The origins and amplification of this development and its impact on the rise of nationalism are major concerns of this chapter. Finally, the modification of northern religious practices to fit the ritual landscape of the south is appropriately documented but the process of authentication was not adequately discussed.

In chapter 5, Allman and Parker return to northeastern Ghana to evaluate the implementation of indirect rule from the late 1920s to the close of World War II as well as the role of Meyer Fortes in researching and documenting the Talensi. The relationship between Fortes and the colonial administration as presented here is fascinating. In this regard, the authors report that, "Fortes would become intimately involved with the reformulation of colonial rule in Taleland" (p. 191). They are also critical of his "strictly synchronic analysis" (p. 216). However, Fortes did not entirely ignore history but was primarily focused on the issues of kinship and social structure as were many British anthropologists. In fact, many of the historical de-

velopment cited by Allman and Parker occurred after the field research of Fortes in the mid-1930s. The final chapter brings Tongnaab into the twenty-first century as both a pilgrimage and tourist destination. The current social, political, economic and religious situation of the Upper East Region of Ghana is seen as the reflection of a long historical process in which Tongnaab has continued to function.

Jean Allman and John Parker, who are both historians, are to be commended for their exceptionally innovative study of this small but relatively well-documented ethnic group in the Upper East Region of Ghana. As historians, the importance of diachronic approach is stressed but at times, the authors are overly critical of scholars who employ more synchronic methodologies. However, their excellent investigation is not only factually dense but does raise significant questions about current and past methodologies. Both old and new illustrations as well as maps contribute to the usefulness of the book.

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