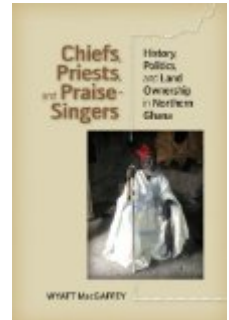


Wyatt MacGaffey. *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. xii + 227 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3386-3.



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Wyatt MacGaffey's book on northern Ghana is an extensive and highly detailed investigation of Dagbon (Dagomba or Dagbamba) culture from the fifteenth century to the present. It is especially concerned with the nature of the Dagbon sociopolitical system. His analysis is based on fieldwork conducted for two months every year from 1996 to 2012. MacGaffey also draws heavily on the existing literature for this area including oral tradition and archival documents. However, contrary to its title, the book actually focuses on the eastern part of northern Ghana, an area that includes the Upper East Region and the eastern half of the Northern Region. The western part of the Northern Region has a very different history and culture and is only briefly mentioned.

The first chapter, "Colonial Anthropology and Historical Reconstruction," effectively challenges many of the misconceptions and misinterpretations found in earlier publications and documents. MacGaffey begins by rejecting the long-held assumption that the non-centralized societies of northern Ghana were not affected by the politi-

cal developments of the Dagbon and Mamprugu (Mamprussi) kingdoms (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries). Although some cultures of the Upper East and Northern Regions were not directly involved in state formation, they were never isolated from the centralizing development of their neighbors. In the first paragraph of chapter 1, MacGaffey states that "it is more consistent with the available facts and with modern political anthropology to treat the north as a single region in which the boundaries separating states from the stateless were permeable, political structures were in constant reorganization, and identities were fluid and situational" (p. 11). This represents a major shift in how northern Ghana has been portrayed by many scholars.

Chapter 1 primarily investigates the history and political traditions of the eastern part of the Northern Region. However the Gonja and Wa kingdoms of northwestern Ghana are briefly described and only vaguely connected to the book's focus on the northeast. An important contribution of this chapter is the rejection of earlier interpre-

tations and accounts that have suggested a homogeneity for those political units that were classified as states. For MacGaffey, it is the special power of the ruler rather than territory or homogeneity that better defines the political organization. In this regard, Dagbon is said to stand apart from others in its origin, size, and greater centralization. This in part serves to support why the book is primarily an account of the history and development of the Dagbon kingdom. In addition the significance of slave raiding, the history of state formation, the role of *tindanas* (custodians of the earth), the nature of chieftaincy, and the contributions of historians since the 1960s are the other main topics covered in this chapter. The chapter concludes by expressing a concern that the complexities of the northern political systems in terms of the opposition between religious chiefs and political chiefs have been misunderstood by both scholars and the central government, colonial and contemporary. As a result of this misunderstanding, the significant role of the *tindanas* in the traditional political system has been overlooked.

Chapter 2, "Drum Chant and the Political Uses of Tradition," examines the nature and history of Dagbon chieftaincy as well as issues of succession, particularly in terms of the paramount chief, the Ya Na of Yendi. MacGaffey acknowledges that the material gathered before the late seventeenth century is problematic as it is based almost entirely on oral tradition and that this material has influenced early written accounts resulting in their variability. Although the Dagbon claim that their drum history is absolutely true, MacGaffey makes it clear that scholars now regard it as subject to manipulation and therefore not always accurate. Yet these drum chants contain a wealth of historical documentation. In this chapter, the amount and complexity of factual information presented by MacGaffey is overwhelming, even to scholars knowledgeable of the area. The discussion becomes even harder to follow when it jumps between Dagbon and Mamprugu or makes reference to similar traditions found elsewhere in

Africa, such as the comparison in this chapter of Dagbon drummers with mediums of Malagasy. Although these asides add a broader perspective to the issues being discussed, some of them might have been better handled as footnotes.

The most significant part of chapter 2 deals with the political history of the region beginning with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately the connection to the Asante is only briefly mentioned. But more important, the list of Dagbon rulers, indicating their relationship, is most helpful. Both the succession disputes and continuing conflict between two rival factions of the royal family (Andani and Abudu) that began in the nineteenth century are clearly introduced. MacGaffey then states that "Dagbon in colonial times (1905-57) can be described as the Third Kingdom" where the functions of traditional rulers and their power base were changed significantly (p. 57). Various types of interactions and conflicts between the traditional rulers and the colonial government were presented.

Chapter 3 is a basic ethnographic study of the Dagbon and similar cultures of northeastern Ghana and is especially concerned with the balance of power and structural tension between the chiefs and *tindanas*. MacGaffey states that "one of the arguments of this book is that the chief-*tindana* couple is fundamental to northern culture and its historical development" (p. 69). In fact, *tindanas* are most significant in the northeastern part of Ghana. MacGaffey then challenges the commonly held view that within this area there are two distinct types of populations, indigenous ones and invaders, stressing that actually there is considerable variation in how this is structured. He states that even the Dagbon are a mosaic of chieftaincies.

Next, the types of earth shrines and their functions are discussed. MacGaffey indicates that they are ancient in origin and then proceeds to compare them to Bamana *boli* (a power object) as well as to historical battlefields in order to give a

broader perspective to the concept of a shrine involving the earth. A discussion or at least some reference to the earthen ancestral shrines found in front of the family compounds of many ethnic groups of northeastern Ghana would have been relevant at this point. In his reporting on the sacrifices that occur at these shrines, MacGaffey spends three highly informative pages on types of sacrifice and reasons for them. His consideration of these broader concerns is of value to African scholarship in general. MacGaffey then stresses that the rules of succession and the ritual roles of a *tendana* are much more variable than those related to chieftaincy. Next, he discusses the much more complex succession rules for chiefs followed by the types of dress and ritual objects associated with both *tindanas* and chiefs. References to visual culture are scattered throughout the book. The chapter ends with a description of different types of shrines and their uses.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the rituals involved with becoming a chief (*enskinment*). This includes a description of various procedures and historical accounts that are at times extremely detailed. Again the book becomes almost encyclopedic in its presentation. Issues of migration, regional variations, the relationship between chiefs and *tindanas*, and the histories of specific shrines are also considered in this chapter. A brief reference at the end of the chapter is made to the concepts of chief and *tindana* among the non-centralized cultures in the Upper East Region and Upper West Region. Chapter 5 focuses on Tamale, the largest city in northern Ghana, created by the British in 1907 as the capital of what are today the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West Regions. The various relationships between local leaders in the Tamale area, the Dagbon rulers in Yendi, the British, and eventually the national government are the concerns of this chapter. The joining of traditional rivalries with national politics has complicated the power structure of the area and

has led to what MacGaffey calls the Fourth Kingdom that began with independence in 1957.

The role and nature of “chiefs in the national arena” are examined in chapter 6, which begins with noting the differences between the Akan chiefs of southern Ghana and the northern chiefs. However, the colonial or national governments have not always recognized these differences. The constitutional role of chiefs in modern-day Ghana and their ownership of land are issues raised by MacGaffey in this chapter. He notes that chieftaincy rivalries have been complicated by the involvement of political parties. In his five-page conclusion, MacGaffey reiterates many of the points made in the previous six chapters and concludes by stating that “the history of the north has always been one of constant movement, a play of ambition, opportunity, exogenous influence, and intrusion” (p. 181).

Following the conclusion, there is an appendix entitled “Outline of Ritual Practice in Dagbon” in which herbal cures and shrines are briefly discussed. The Dagbon refer to herbal cures as *tima*, temporal, fabricated objects, in contrast to shrines, which are believed to be timeless. At this point, MacGaffey finally discusses the ancestral shrines, a major architectural feature of northeastern Ghana. The appendix is well written, presenting important insight into the worldview of the peoples of northeastern Ghana.

Overall the book was difficult to read because of the quantity of factual information. Yet it is clearly a major resource for understanding both the history and the social, religious, and political systems of this area. In addition, MacGaffey corrects many of the misunderstandings and/or prejudices of earlier scholars. Most important, the author frequently brings in significant comparisons to other cultures in order to connect the specific facts of northern Ghana to broader, more theoretical ideas.

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