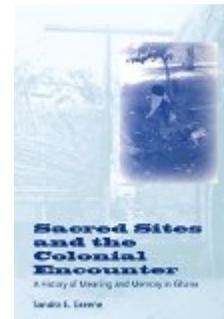


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sandra E. Greene. *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xx + 200 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34073-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21517-8.

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Sandra Greene's newest work, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*, continues her exploration of and association with the Anlo-Ewe. As a history heavily influenced by the social sciences, this text—like its predecessor, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast*—focuses upon conceptions of place and identity during a period of great transformation for the Anlo-Ewe. By synthesizing sources from missionaries, the local literati, and the colonial administration with oral histories and ethnographic observation, the author is ultimately successful at presenting an innovative and balanced narrative of how these communities constructed themselves, their bodies, and their environments in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Greene's explorations revolve around five themes: the Ewe ancestral hometown of Notsie, the bodies of water—fresh and salt—that give life to the coastal Ewe communities, the burial and meaning of the dead, the human body, and, finally, the town of Anloga as both a spiritual and a secular site. Each of these investigations, embodied in its own chapter, follows a generally chronological pattern that nevertheless manages to be more about process than about status. Each is a distinct post-post-modern analysis in which a variety of actors—both indigenous and outsider—are given their due. The author strives to avoid the easy path of attributing, to the Anlo-Ewe, agency beyond their abilities. Clearly, they were forced to respond to the Bremen missionaries and the British District Commissioners, to incorporate new information and different worldviews. As a community, they were not free to reconceive themselves as they wished during this period. Conversely, however, the Anlo strove to guide the transformation process, sometimes with success. On the question of burials, for ex-

ample, Greene argues that “European influences resulted not in the erasure of the meanings and memories associated with burial places and spaces but [rather] a displacement of meanings to new locations” (p. 64). Thus, although many Ewe embraced Christianity and accepted the establishment of church cemeteries, they brought to those cemeteries many of the concepts which had accompanied their previous burial practices. Similarly, the Anlo selected leaders, such as mission-educated Fia Sri II, who could negotiate the difficult processes of accommodation, “modernization” (more about this later), and cultural transformation. In each case, Green rejects the simple route, avoiding over-generalization and easy classification, and instead envisioning a less-easily defined set of actions and responses that shows a wide range of strategies to cope with, exploit, or reject new influences and worldviews entering the community.

What appear at first glance to be ruminations on these diverse subjects are therefore revealed as deeper explorations of the meaning of place and self. Greene sets herself the task of seeking to understand why some concepts and practices, identifiable in the early-nineteenth century, disappear during the colonial era and others endure. For example, some of the most sacred sites for the Anlo-Ewe were freshwater, yet these gradually lost their religious, if not their secular, importance. The sea, on the other hand, endures today as a site of spiritual meaning. Again, it is the Anlo-Ewe who chose which traditions carry on and which fade away, but throughout they were moving through an environment in which their daily lives were changing in response to colonial ordinances and church teachings. Within this matrix, they could act—as “modernizers,” resisters, syncretists (all terms which Greene explicitly or implicitly questions or

rejects)—but not with impunity.

If there is any serious limitation to this exploration of landscape, perspective, and meaning, it is the relative paucity of material on the pre-colonial era. Within each chapter, the discussion concerning the period prior to the nineteenth century especially remains cursory. Admittedly, that may alternatively be a problem with the sources or a result of the focus of the work, which is much later, but it leaves some of us wanting a slightly deeper historical contextualization.

An episodic text such as this could be dismissed too lightly. It should not be. *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter* is the foremost work in one of the most important revisionist trends within West African history. Through both oral tradition and written records, it portrays the dynamics through which people conceptualized their iden-

tity over the course of a period of time. Like the work of Gérard Chouin amongst the Akan and Guan-speaking communities just down the coast, it locates individuals and groups of people within their natural, self-made, and finally globalizing environments.[1] Moving beyond polemical colonial, nationalist, or post-modernist works, it places the Anlo-Ewe within both their own choices and their limitations. This is indeed a significant contribution to the anthropological and historical discourse on the history of a West African people.

Note

[1]. Gérard Chouin, *Eguafo: un royaume africain "au coeur français" (1637-1688), mutations socio-économiques et politique européenne d'un État de la Côte de l'Or (Ghana) au XVIIe siècle*. (Paris: AFERA éd., Karthala diff., 1998).

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