



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft: A Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family* by Wolf Bleek

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BLEEK, WOLF. *Marriage, inheritance and witchcraft: a case study of a rural Ghanaian family* (Med. Afr.-StudCent. 12). x, 436 pp., tables, bibliogr. Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum, 1975. Dfl 10

This is a surprisingly good piece of work. Surprising for several reasons: it is an apparently unmodified M.A. dissertation; its theme is one which many anthropologists have tackled but few with much success; it is not written in the author's mother tongue; and it is presented as an uncorrected, mis-paginated photo-reproduction of a carbon typescript (can Dutch publishing have sunk so low?). Perhaps the most precise evaluation is the author's own: 'this study shows how a microscopic knowledge of face-to-face relationships can unnerve over-courageous general statements and theories'. The text zig-zags between close empirical observation and the standard texts on witchcraft, unnerving some of the new as well as the old interpretations. Presenting his information in the idiom of 'social situation' and 'network' analysis, Bleek makes it clear that he has a keen eye and ear. The vigorous and abundant flow of arguments, crises, schisms and alliances which he describes look very authentic to one familiar with the pace of life in an Akan community. He is not above showing his involvement in crisp evaluations of his own ('Amo's mother . . . is a nasty old lady'), and his English is sometimes felicitously inventive (family 'nagging' leads to witchcraft accusations). Bleek makes the point that close analysis reveals a flow of events which cannot be interpreted in monolithic structural terms but demands a series of analytical frames which keep pace with the action. Kwahu witchcraft is sometimes real, sometimes evanescent, but always an instrument of aggravation rather than an equilibrating or restitutive mechanism. In this regard Bleek makes some interesting observations about the transaction of 'negative relationships' in both daily routine and crises. The thoughtful chapters on inheritance and marriage help the reader to fix the Kwahu in the wider ethnographic context, but it is disappointing that the remarkable Kwahu penchant for trading does not feature more prominently either in description or in analysis. In the end, the conclusions are limp: you will find witchcraft accusations where there is a lot of misfortune about and where people, particularly family members, live in close proximity. Perhaps the opportunity to present his work in a more elegant format would have inspired Bleek to follow his thoughts through from the specific to the general with greater care and thought. However, we are promised more about the Kwahu and the ups and downs of Amo, Osei,

Nana Sampong and the others, and this is certainly an attractive prospect.

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OTITE, ONIGU. *Autonomy and dependence: the Urhobo kingdom of Okpe in modern Nigeria*. xiii, 215 pp. plates, bibliogr. London: C. Hurst, 1973. £4.60

The Urhobo people, numbering over half a million, live on the borders of the Niger Delta, immediately to the south of the kingdom of Benin. Though Edo speaking, and formally within the Benin empire, Benin rule seems to have been slight and intermittent. The Urhobo are constituted into twenty independent polities of which Okpe, with a population of 80,000 is the largest. Okpe itself is constituted of 150 towns and villages, two-thirds of which have fewer than 500 people, only six more than 2,000.

The traditional political organisation of the Okpe rests largely with the age grades and an elected council of chiefs; government was highly decentralised. The Okpe believe that kingship existed in the past though only one title holder can be named and the office was vacant from the seventeenth to the present century. In this book, Dr Otite reconstructs the traditional political system from oral history and from extrapolation from contemporary practices. He then shows that whilst the British first disregarded customary modes of government and only later, in the 1930's, began consciously to apply principles of indirect rule, the Okpe for their part endeavoured to assert their identity in compelling a respect for their chieftaincy; in the 1940's the post of supreme ruler was filled once more, and grudgingly recognised by the British.

The latter half of the book deals with the interplay in the 1960's between the political institutions at the national and regional level with the customary chieftaincy—itsself changing radically as most title holders lived not in the villages but in the modern towns of Sapele and Warri. Otite has produced a useful monograph, firstly in supplying another piece in the Nigerian ethnographic jigsaw and secondly in defining at some length the relationship between traditional and modern political institutions. One wishes that he had focused more on selected individuals, showing how they attempted to achieve and maintain positions of power in such a rapidly changing situation—but when the events are so recent the dangers of libel may not be easy to avoid.

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