



## SHRINES IN AFRICA History, Politics and Society

Edited by Allan Dawson

ISBN 978-1-55238-544-9

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



# Introduction

ALLAN CHARLES DAWSON

There is a clear West African bias to the papers in this volume. Much of the reason for this is the influence of Peter Lewis Shinnie on the life and careers of a number of the researchers presented here. Peter passed on in the summer of 2007, but his voice still echoes in these pages.

\*\*\*\*\*

Shrines, in the African context are cultural signposts that help us understand and read the ethnic, territorial, and social lay of the land. Just as the church steeple in Europe once marked the centre of a community whose boundaries lay at the point where the rising spire came into view or the tolling of the bells could be heard, shrines on the African landscape help shape and define village, community, and ethnic boundaries. Shrines are physical manifestations of a group's claim to a particular piece of land and are thus markers of identity – they represent, both figuratively and literally, a community's 'roots' in the land they work and live upon. The shrine is representative of a connection with the land at the cosmological and supernatural level and, in terms of a community's or ethnic group's claim to cultivable territory, serves as a reminder to outsiders that this is – in very real terms – 'our land.'

Shrines are vessels in two important senses. They can act as containers in a literal sense for the spirits of ancestors and deities who must be regularly placated and petitioned for blessings, requests for intercession, and divine sanction. These spirits or entities must be venerated with pilgrimages, offerings such as money, food, beer and hard alcohol, and sacrifices of fowl, small stock and cattle. Spiritual intercession from ancestors and deities is sought for a wide range of events, including but not limited to: births, marriages and funerals; the appointment of a new chief; the building of a

new home or compound; political or military success; protection against witchcraft; a safe journey; and, perhaps most importantly, the planting or harvesting of a season's agricultural produce. Indeed, supplication to a shrine is motivated by the same reasons that a Christian might use to go to church or a Hindu might offer for supporting their local temple to Ganesh. Shrines are also *symbolic* vessels and reference points for knowledge about the social universe within which different African communities must live. Shrines serve to demarcate areas of territory and thus provide members of a community with a way to assert rights of cultivation over land. In those parts of Africa where internal migration and movement is commonplace, shrines form part of a system or network of boundary markers that say to outsiders: "we got here first."

## AUTOCHTHONY

Recent anthropological literature that looks at autochthony and citizenship explores assertions of origin from and connectedness with the land (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Geschiere and Nyomnjoh 2000; Leonhardt 2006). Autochthony literally means 'of the soil' or 'of the earth,' and for the societies under scrutiny here, these concepts are of particular relevance. Each of them is engaged in the process of legitimating not only their claim upon a territory but also their existence as a distinct group with rights to institutions such as paramount chiefs and representation in national political bodies. These groups are active in proclaiming their rights over the land in a language that at once evokes both essentialized notions of 'belonging' to the land and linkages with the 'soil' and also overt references to those who do not 'belong' – foreigners. We need only look to Rwanda, Darfur, and Côte D'Ivoire for clear examples of this kind of rhetoric. Moreover, these kinds of processes are not unique to Africa. All over of the world, the march towards ever more integrated forms of globalization seems to also invite renewed struggles over who is 'of the land' and who is a 'stranger.' The language of autochthony, again, in the African context, differs from that of indigenes as it implicitly accepts that societies can move or migrate into new areas. Claims of autochthony do rest on something of a quasi-mystical attachment to the land, much like those of indigeneity, but

are distinguished by two important points: firstly, that societies, communities, bands of pioneers, kin groups, etc., have continued to move around and stake out new territory on the African landscape; and secondly, that upon the establishment of a compound, homestead, village or community, these pioneers – through the establishment of an earth shrine that symbolically represents their existence as cultivators and as societies that practice ancestor veneration – become inextricably linked with the land they occupy. This linkage becomes a major component of the representation, projection, and management of group – whether regional or ethnic – identity. Indeed, those societies that practice earth and ancestor veneration, and a number of them are discussed in this volume, typically employ a very elaborate vocabulary of primordial interconnectivity with the land in their ethnic discourse, and the shrine, whether a baobab tree or a piece of pottery, is the ultimate symbolic manifestation of this link – the shrine is autochthony made real.

Although, with one notable exception, the papers in this volume focus on West African societies, all of the authors seek to demonstrate how an understanding of shrines can shed light on patterns of settlement and migration in Africa. An overarching theme that can be found in all of the papers is that societies interact with objects of ritual devotion – shrines – in differing ways based on their distance from metropolises of power and how a particular group symbolically constructs the earth on which it resides. This idea owes much to Igor Kopytoff's notion of an internal African frontier that exists in the "open areas nestling between organized societies": what might be called an "interstitial frontier" or institutionally open-space where new social processes might develop and unfold (Kopytoff 1987:9). Into this space are sent 'frontiersmen,' first-comers and founders; migrants sloughed off by their own society due to dwindling cultivable land, populations fleeing from slave-raiders and conflict, or rural farmers escaping the influence of a growing urban environment (Kopytoff 1987).

For Kopytoff, the primary problem for African societies pushed out into the open spaces – into hinterlands or the 'bush' – was the construction and legitimation of authority over their new territory, over existing populations or over late arrivals to a newly staked-out area (1987). Often, new settlements placed non-kin or competing ethnic groups in close proximity and frontiersmen were forced to reinterpret ideas of kinship and authority. The authors of the papers in this volume contend that within these newly created social spaces the shrine comes to signify and

represent claims to ownership, rights of usage and residence, and fluctuating assertions of ethnic and religious distinctiveness. Further, the shrine, by symbolically representing a new settlement's connection with the spirits of the land and with ancestors, serves to reinforce or to reorganize internal forms of solidarity and identity. Shrines act as important symbols of group membership and collective identity – ethnic, religious, and regional. From the West African savannah to montagnard Morocco, shrines serve to culturally demarcate the landscape, asserting origin, ownership, and historical connectedness with a piece of earth.

## ETHNIC IDENTITY

Over the past two decades, anthropology and cognate disciplines have come to view ethnic identity not as bounded and stable, especially in areas like the West African savannah, but as mutable and flexible and as an instrument to be used to further a collective's goals (Fardon 1996; Jenkins 1997; Lentz 1994; Murphy and Bledsoe 1987; Royce 1982; Smedley 1999; Stahl 1991). The belief that all African societies exist in neat little ethnic boxes, persuasively and richly described by an ethnographer/biographer, was very much a product of a particular period of British social anthropology. Kopytoff writes:

Occasionally ... African societies ... do not fit the tribal model.... Such a society does not quite hang together. It presents a mishmash of regional cultural traits.... The legitimacy of its political institutions comes periodically into question, as does its independence from nearby polities who may dispute the very territory it occupies. (1987:4–5)

To be sure, there are some African societies that more obviously fit this description than others. However, I would argue that anyone familiar with the internals of African social organization and local discourses about ethnic identity in groups both large and small in Africa will find that these kind of ambiguities exist within the marginalized groups of the savannah – historically, the so-called *acephalous* societies of the Sahel – and the mighty chiefdoms and kingdoms of regions like the Guinea coast and the

Horn. For example, recent scholarship about the origins of the Yoruba in Nigeria points to significant regional differences between the Òyó, Ègbá, Ègbádò, Ìjèsà, and other component Yoruba chiefdoms in their overall relationship with Ilé-Ifè as the Yoruba traditional centre and capital (dare we say shrine?), and in the belief of descent from the same founding hero – Odùduwà (Matory 2005). Histories of slavery, conquest, and expansion among larger groups such as the Gonja and Asante of West Africa also call into question the stability of ethnic categories, as subjected peoples often slipped in-and-out as members of the dominant ethnic group, based on contingency and circumstance (Staniland 1975; Wilks 1961; Wilks et al. 1986).

Autochthony, as the Comaroff's write, elevates "to a first-principle the ineffable interests and connections, at once material and moral, that flow from 'native' rootedness, and special rights, in a place of birth" (2001: 635). Claims of autochthony are implicit in Kopytoff's model of migration on the African frontier. They form the basis for arguments about group identity formation in a fragmented landscape of changing kin and ethnic affiliations. In the context of the post-colonial African state, autochthony now serves as the most 'authentic' way to assert not only a group's roots in a particular territory but also, more importantly, the rights and status of a group as citizens of the nation state. In this sense, the shrine, as a symbolic nexus for concentrating and honing ideas about a collective's unity, mirrors the unpredictability and malleability of group membership within the African state.

## TAXONOMIES OF 'SHRINES'

Shrines, like collectives, are not immutable and their meaning within the society fluctuates as the morphology of the collective changes. Groups can be expelled from the territory that they claim to have founded and where their earth shrine dwells, and consequently new earth shrines can be established or proxies in new territories can serve old, inaccessible shrines. In cases where another ethnic group takes over a territory from its former occupants, local discourse about an important physical feature of the landscape considered an earth shrine or ritual locale is modified or adjusted to support the claims of the new inhabitants to the territory. Shrines can

be modified, rebuilt, renovated, relocated, forgotten, re-legitimized, and forgotten once again.

African shrines can be material objects such as ceramic pots, shaped stones, constructed buildings, houses, tombs, gravesites, or assemblages of rocks. They may also be natural features of the landscape such as mountains, ponds, lakes, rivers, or other water features and embody a specific or localized representation of a larger supernatural force. The famous rock shelter of *Tongnaab*, Lake Bosumtwi in the Ashanti region of central Ghana, and the various forms of the *Adansonia* genus of tree found throughout the African savannah – the Baobab – all fall into this category.

Elizabeth Colson (1997) distinguishes between two kinds of shrines or foci of ritual activity among the Tonga of Zimbabwe, and this taxonomy of shrines is, I believe, of use in our review of the discussions presented in this volume. For Colson, “shrines of the land” are those constructed by human hands – they embody spirits that once existed on the earthly plain and require offerings from their descendants or kin group (1997:52). Contrasting these more local shrines exist “places of power,” which are typically permanent landscape features regarded as intrinsically sacred or powerful. They are associated with named spirits from mythology, essences of nature such as the ‘goddess of the sea’ or the ‘god of the mountain’ or with the founding heroes or apical ancestor of an ethnic group, region or state (Colson 1997:52). As Mather notes, “‘shrines of the land’ encode local histories ... while ‘places of power’ express histories transcending human actors and local communities” (2003:26).

The distinction Colson makes hinges on local and regional bodies of knowledge about history and identity. Shrines of the land correspond to local ideas about identity that operate along the cleavages between immediate neighbours both at the intra-ethnic level – between kin-groups, clans, or neighbouring communities – and at the inter-ethnic level between neighbouring groups. These interactions are certainly important for understanding the internal placement of kin-groups on the ground and on local boundary disputes between ethnic groups. However, their importance as cultural signposts flows from the discourse that exists around ‘places of power.’ These higher-level foci for ritual activity articulate ideas about identity and group cohesion that operate at the regional and, crucially, at the state level. In an era where ethnic competition within the state increasingly incorporates primordial ethnic language and the vocabulary of autochthony, issues of citizenship and rights over land hinge

on authenticity and legitimacy. Ethnic groups are often forced to respond to the accusation of rivals that they are ‘foreigners,’ ‘interlopers, or ‘invaders’ (Marshall-Fratani 2006) and so ‘places of power’ come to symbolically represent the ethnic unity of a group and their rightful place within the territorial boundaries of the state.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Two of the contributions in this volume focus specifically on the first-comer–latecomer dynamics of political authority in Africa as they pertain to earth shrines. Carola Lentz’s *Constructing Ritual Protection on an Expanding Settlement Frontier: Earth Shrines in the Black Volta Region* focuses on the Dagara in the area between the Volta Rivers of northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of migration and movement of Dagara-speaking groups in the Black Volta region of West Africa into thinly settled areas of the savannah. Lentz focuses on the discourse of earth shrine creation in local histories about Dagara expansion and competition with neighbouring groups. For Lentz earth shrines serve, in some ways, as a deed or title to land and the ability to serve a shrine signifies a group’s ownership of a particular territory.

Allan Charles Dawson’s *Earth Shrines and Autochthony among the Konkomba of Northern Ghana* also deals with one of the so-called acephalous peoples of West Africa, the Konkomba. Dawson’s work explores how claims of autochthony by this ethnic group to a former settlement and its associated earth shrine are representative of attitudes towards chieftaincy and embody articulations of ethnic identity. For the Konkomba, asserting their autochthony and their right to venerate the earth shrine of their ancient capital means more than just a claim to land. Right of access to the shrine of Yendi is an important step, many Konkomba argue, in their quest to gain a paramount chief in Ghana’s national House of Chiefs. Although the Konkomba openly scorn the institution of chieftaincy and generally regard the office of earth priest in their villages with much more respect, this move needs to be understood in the context of regional movement to re-legitimize chieftaincy in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. The discourse of development workers, non-governmental community agencies, and scholars in Ghana and indeed throughout much of Africa has,

in the past decade, started to emphasize a renewed role for chiefs and traditional authority in African governance – economic development and the expansion of democratic ideals in Africa must include, is it argued, Africa’s original forms of political authority (see Ray 1996 and Skalnik 1996). For the Konkomba, the attainment of paramount status, concomitant citizenship in the community of traditional leaders, and their place as an autochthonous people of northern Ghana are all linked to their claims to the earth shrine of Yendi.

Doing archaeological research in tropical Africa presents its own array of unique difficulties. With a nod to methodology, Charles Mather, in *Shrines and Compound Abandonment: Ethnoarchaeological Observations in Northern Ghana amongst the Kusasi* demonstrates that in instances of compound abandonment in northern Ghana by the Kusasi where curation of useable material culture has not taken place, shrines often stand a good chance of being output into the archaeological record. This paper examines the likelihood of shrines being output into the archaeological record and provides suggestions about the strategies archaeologists can employ to discover shrines at abandoned compound sites.

In African history and anthropology there is perhaps no better-known shrine than the *Tongnaab* shrine of the Tallensi of northern Ghana, brought to prominence, ethnographically speaking, by the seminal work of Meyer Fortes (1945; 1949). *Tongnaab* is very much a ‘place of power’ for the Tallensi people, but also represents a body of knowledge about the history of the Tongo Hills and the Tallensi people that permeates the entire Voltaic cultural landscape. From Dagara country in the East, to Asante in the South, to the Mossi plains across the border in southern Burkina Faso, *Tongnaab* is recognized as one of the most important shrines in West Africa. Upon my first visit to *Tongnaab* in 2001, my Konkomba friends asked me if I would petition the shrine for them. “But you are Konkomba; how can you ask that shrine for anything?” I asked them. My friend responded, “Well, our ancestors were related to the Tallensi and anyway, that is one of the most important and powerful shrines in all of Ghana; even the Asante fear it! Its strong!” It is commonly held in Ghana that the Tallensi and the people of the Voltaic highlands retreated into the hill country to escape the attacks of mounted slave raiders from the south. That the Konkomba, also a people that were historically subject to slave raiding, should mark – at the level of exoteric knowledge about the region – *Tongnaab* as a shrine that represents the unity of the Tallensi and a history of Tale resistance to

slavery is significant. Ritual locales such as *Tongnaab* in their service of collective identity help express more than just an ethnicity but can also help articulate a broader political message of unity and resistance. In *The Archaeology of Shrines among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana: Materiality and Interpretive Relevance*, Timothy Insoll, Benjamin Kankpeyeng, and Rachel MacLean seek to supplement the anthropological material and the apparent dearth of archaeological data on the Tallensi shrines of the Tongo Hills, including *Tongnaab*, by reconstructing the history of movement and settlement and the sequence of occupation in this part of northern Ghana through excavation.

Judith Sterner's and Nicholas David's *Pots, Stones, and Potsherds: Shrines in the Mandara Mountains (North Cameroon and North-western Nigeria)*, present a number of case studies that demonstrate how an understanding of the various types of shrines found in these montagnard communities throws light on the nature of regional diasporas and migration. The study of shrines, the authors suggest, not only provides information about the roots of political authority in the Mandara region but also illuminates the importance of considering shrines when trying to understand historical process in general.

Finally, Doyle Hatt's paper in this volume, *Moroccan Saints' Shrines as Systems of Distributed Knowledge*, is concerned primarily with what Moroccan saints' shrines mean in both the local and in the broader national context. The focus of this paper is on how a shrines' 'external' meaning is part of a category of phenomena situated within an overall system of knowledge about landscape and space within the wider culture. Hatt, like Colson, differentiates between shrines that represent bodies of knowledge about the local landscape and local history and shrines that operate at a national level and embody a discourse about the history of the Moroccan people and state. All of the shrines discussed by Hatt are of the material culture type in that they are, even at the most basic level, constructed by human action in some way. Hatt distinguishes between different forms of *marabout* or saint shrine on the basis of the differential meanings and bodies of knowledge that locals and visitors attach to them and the extent to which the shrines transact ideas about the local and the national. In this sense, small saint shrines that represent ideas about the community and landscape that are highly localized and esoteric very much conform to Colson's idea of a 'shrine of the land' – To understand what these shrines represent, individuals and groups need to tap into local knowledge and

local meanings. At the broader regional level exist the shrines of well-known *marabouts* and patron saints and at the national level, the tombs of sultans Muḥāy Idrīs I and Sdī Muhammad V. These broader-level shrines are very much ‘places of power’ in that they are signifiers of collective identity and are associated with mythical founder heroes who embody what it means to be Moroccan.

## REFERENCES

- Ceuppens, Bambi, and Peter Geschiere. “Autochthony: Local or Global? New Modes in the Struggle over Citizenship and Belonging in Africa and Europe.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2005): 385–407.
- Colson, Elizabeth. “Places of Power and Shrines of the Land.” *Paideuma* 43 (1997): 47–57.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. “Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 627–51.
- Fardon, Richard. “‘Crossed Destinies’: The Entangled Histories of West African Ethnic and National Identities.” In *Ethnicity in Africa: Roots, Meanings and Implications*, edited by Louise de la Gorgendière, Kenneth King, and Sarah Vaughn, 117–46. Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh, 1996.
- Fortes, Meyer. *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi, Being the First Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe*. London: International African Institute, 1945.
- . *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi; the Second Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe*. London: International African Institute, 1949.
- Geschiere, Peter, and Stephen Jackson. “Autochthony and the Crisis of Citizenship: Democratization, Decentralization, and the Politics of Belonging.” *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006): 1.
- Geschiere, Peter, and Francis Nyamnjoh. “Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging.” *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 423–52.
- Jenkins, Richard. *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.
- Kopytoff, Igor. “The Internal African Frontier.” In *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, edited by Igor Kopytoff, 3–84. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Lentz, Carola. “‘They Must Be Dagaba First and Any Other Thing Second ...’: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Creation of Ethnic Identities in Northwestern Ghana.” *African Studies* 53, no. 2 (1994): 57–91.
- Leonhardt, Alec. “Baka and the Magic of the State: Between Autochthony and Citizenship.” *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006): 69–94.

- Marshall-Fratani, Ruth. "The War of 'Who Is Who': Autochthony, Nationalism, and Citizenship in the Ivoirian Crisis." *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006): 9–43.
- Mather, Charles. "Shrines and the Domestication of Landscape." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 59, no. 1 (2003): 23–45.
- Matory, J. Lorand. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Murphy, William P., and Caroline H. Bledsoe. "Kinship and Territory in the History of a Kpelle Chiefdom (Liberia)." In *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, edited by Igor Kopytoff, 123–47. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Ray, Donald I. "Divided Sovereignty: Traditional Authority and the State in Ghana." *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 37–38 (1996): 181–202.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- Skalnik, Peter. "Authority Versus Power: Democracy in Africa Must Include Original African Institutions." *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 37–38 (1996): 110–22.
- Smedley, A. "Race and the Construction of Human Identity." *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (1999): 690–702.
- Stahl, Ann B. "Ethnic Style and Ethnic Boundaries: A Diachronic Case Study from West-Central Ghana." *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 3 (1991): 250–75.
- Staniland, M. *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Wilks, Ivor. *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*. Legon: Institute of African Studies, University College of Ghana, 1961.
- Wilks, Ivor, Nehemia Levtzion, and Bruce M. Haight. *Chronicles from Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

