

*Tongnaab: The History of a West African God.* By Jean Allman and John Parker. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 301. (ISBN-13: 978-0-253-34665-0) \$ 65.00, cloth; (ISBN-13: 978-0-253-21806-3) \$ 24.95, paperback.

In this remarkable book on the movement and transformation of Tongnaab (literally: chief of the earth), a Talensi god and ancestor shrine from the Tong Hills in north-eastern Ghana, once studied by Meyer Fortes, Jean Allman and John Parker defy conventional dichotomies of tradition versus modernity. “Far from being an ancient ‘tribal’ god swept aside by the coming of the so-called world religions”, Allman and Parker argue, “Tongnaab held its own in the increasingly competitive ritual market place of colonial West Africa” (6). In their endeavour to re-insert “African gods and their constituencies into history” (6), the authors drew on a wide range of written and oral sources. They exploited existing ethnographies and archival material, gathered in as many as nine different archives throughout Ghana, and conducted extensive interviews with lineage elders, earth priests, chiefs and shrine custodians in the Tong Hills as well as with the guardians of Tongnaab shrines in southern Ghana. A captivating collection of historical and recent photographs of shrines, shrine keepers and other historical personages supports their narrative of trans-regional religious exchange and mutual adaptation of ritual practices between northern and southern Ghana (and beyond).

The six chapters of the book aptly move back and forth between the savannah, and the rain forest and coastal plains of Ghana. The first chapter locates the Tong Hills in the pre-colonial history of the belt of “stateless” societies between the Mossi, Dagomba and Mamprussi kingdoms which served as an internal frontier and “zone of refuge” (33). Allman and Parker’s hypothesis that it was against the background of the worldly insecurity caused by the nineteenth-century incursions of Muslim slave-raiders and local warlords that Tongnaab shrines gained prominence both as physical sanctuaries and as places of ritual power, and that these two functions reinforced each other, seems plausible. By the early twentieth century, two Tongnaab shrines in particular, Bonaab and Yanii, near the village of Tengzug, became the focus of well-organised ritual networks integrating clients from among neighbouring Kasena, Builsa and Nankana groups as well as the surrounding kingdoms. Pilgrims could acquire portable shrines which in turn fostered subordinate ritual systems. Physically mobile and ideologically flexible, Tongnaab could spread relatively easily beyond the Talensi territory. However, it was not until the mid-1920s that Tongnaab was first carried beyond the savannah into the Asante kingdom of Akyem Abuakwa, by one Kobina Assifu, a cocoa farmer and entrepreneur, who became the most important propagator of Tongnaab’s powers against witchcraft.

In the Tong Hills, the shrines became a centre of Tallensi resistance to colonial rule, prompting British officers to order the destruction of “the Fetish grove” and to force the population of Tengzug to move to the plains. However, as Allman and Parker discuss in chapter 2, the British did not realise they had only destroyed one of several powerful shrines, namely the Bonaab, while the Yanii, intact, continued to receive secret nightly visits by its custodians and clients. Tengol, a custodian of the Yanii shrine, whom the British had installed as chief of Tengzug, proved to be an extremely able ritual entrepreneur, using the shrine’s increasing popularity for personal economic gain. Tengol managed to direct the growing interregional pilgrimage towards the Yanii

shrine and to convince the British that their troops had only destroyed the “bad” Tongnaab while the surviving “good” Yanii shrine should be allowed to operate openly. Thus, ironically, the Yanii custodians “were able to accumulate ritual power with the support of the colonial state” (100).

Chapters 3 and 4 present an intriguing history of witchcraft discourses and anti-witchcraft movements in southern Ghana from the 1870s onwards, and of the longstanding importation of northern ritual practices and objects. Allman and Parker show how Akan stereotypes of savannah inhabitants as primitive, untouched peoples with mysterious ritual sites and objects paved the way for the triumph of “Nana Tongo”, as Tongnaab came to be known in the south, as a particularly powerful anti-witchcraft cult. They also analyse the ensuing debates among colonial officials, missionaries, Christians and cult owners about the legitimacy and “rationality” of anti-witchcraft “medicines”. J. B. Danquah, later one of the leading Gold Coast nationalists, defended Assifu and his “Nana Tongo” in court, asserting the value of local culture and equating indigenous healing practices with western biomedicine. Although Allman and Parker’s claim that this defence can be seen as one of “the earliest articulations of Ghana-as-nation” (181) is debatable, their argument that far from being a “one-way importation of uncivilized ‘foreign fetishes’ into the civilizing south”, the trans-regional ritual commerce centred on Tong Naab/Nana Tongo was “a very modern response” to “a rapidly modernizing world” (180–81), is certainly convincing.

Chapter 5 moves back into the Tong Hills, offering an insightful analysis of “the making of colonial Taleland”. Of particular interest are Allman and Parker’s discussion of Meyer Fortes’ role in the implementation of indirect rule during the 1930s, which was much more active than generally acknowledged in the standard accounts of disciplinary history. While their critique of Fortes’ “complicity with imperial culture” (216) in taking the Talensi outside history and enshrining them “as the very model of a traditional, stateless society” (194) is not new, the historical contextualisation of his fieldwork – the reform of chiefly hierarchies that Fortes hardly mentioned and the enormous expansion of the ritual economy centred on the Yanii-Tongnaab shrine which he regarded as upsetting the social equilibrium – does shed new light on his writings. Finally, chapter 6 traces the history of Tongnaab from the 1950s to the present, showing how the Akan, Ga and Ewe pilgrims as well as returning Talensi migrants spread southern beliefs about witchcraft in the savannah, and how witch-finding became part of Tongnaab’s enhanced powers. Most recently, since the 1990s, some of Tengol’s sons have tried to promote the Tong Hills and Tengzug as a tourist attraction and have, with the support of the authors, petitioned for official recognition as a UNESCO world heritage site. This has provoked debates over the desired relationship between pilgrimage and tourism, as well as over the who ought to profit from the revenues.

If one were to raise any criticism, then perhaps in light of the authors’ greater familiarity with the history of the Asante and the Ga than with that of the societies of North Ghana and the neighbouring savannahs. Particularly in the first chapter imprecisions with regard to Mossi history (it seems that the authors chose not to include much of the francophone literature on the subject, particularly Izard’s recent revisionist account) detract from the text. Similarly unsatisfying were assessments of the first European reports, such as the authors’ assertion that they made a “sharp distinction between centralized kingdoms and dispersed stateless ‘tribes’” (27) or that the

ethnonym “Gurunsi” was “hotly debated” (39). Also, the authors’ implicit assertion to be the first to “insert” the Tong Hills and North Ghana “into history” and “into the narrative of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance” (6–7) sounds somewhat presumptuous considering the works on the pre-colonial history and the colonial transformation of societies in the savannah, including those in the neighbouring Francophone regions, published in the last ten or twenty years. Yet such shortcomings do not make this book anything less than an important, timely contribution to many, interconnected themes of West African anthropology and history: the historicity and flexibility of African ritual practices; the role of religious networks in bridging ethnic, linguistic and regional boundaries; the ambiguities of the colonial encounter with its oscillations between cooperation, resistance and mutual accommodation; the making and limitations of colonial ethnography; and the trajectories and transformations of witchcraft discourses and anti-witchcraft movements.