
Friedson, Steven M. – *Remains of Ritual*

Robert Launay



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/14513>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.14513

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 16 September 2013

Number of pages: 749-750

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2388-4

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Robert Launay, « Friedson, Steven M. – *Remains of Ritual* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 211 | 2013, Online since 20 September 2013, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/14513> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.14513>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

Friedson, Steven M. — *Remains of Ritual*

Robert Launay

REFERENCES

FRIEDSON, Steven M. — *Remains of Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press (“Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology”), 2009, 272 p., bibl.

- 1 In the early twentieth century, a delegation of Ewe from southern Ghana journeyed north to Dagarti, bringing back with them the cult of Lahare Kunde or Brekete, the subject of Friedson’s ethnographic and ethnomusicological study. Unlike other studies of the establishment of “northern” cults in southern Ghana, Friedson employs a phenomenological rather than—arguably to the exclusion of—a historical and sociological approach. Since the author is an ethnomusicologist, it is hardly surprising that he sees in the brekete drum a central metaphor of the cult as a whole. While the form of the drum clearly hails from the north, the Ewe now make it out of oil drums—a foreign but distinctly not a northern material—and play it in a style that is entirely Ewe. Like the drum, the origins of the cult are of secondary importance compared to the way it has been appropriated by the Ewe and made to resonate in a different idiom. In this respect, the book includes a fascinating chapter on “Salah”, on the incorporation of Islamic prayer—the most quintessentially “northern” medium for communicating with the divine—into the Brekete cult. While public prayer in Islam is (at least apparently) dominated by standing and prostrated males, Salah in Brekete is sung by seated women who transpose the Arabic text into distinctively Ewe harmonies. Indeed, the words of many Brekete songs are in languages other than Ewe and often incomprehensible to believers. Friedson rightly castigates analysts who are too quick to equate the literal meanings of religious songs to their underlying significance.
- 2 In the first chapter, Friedson uses the example of ritual possession, of the “wives of the gods” being “mounted” by “divine horsemen”, as a reflection on the dialectic between

alternating modalities of being, “being there” and “being away”. Adopting an analogous perspective, I would suggest that the whole book plays on the dialectic of Friedson’s own complex relationship to Brekete, “being part” and “being apart”. Indeed, much of the book is quite candidly autobiographical, but not in a facile, much less a narcissistic way. It is precisely through his experiencing of Brekete that Freidson seeks to understand and, to the extent it is possible, to convey Brekete as a way of being. On one hand, Friedson refused the temptation to initiate himself into Brekete. On the other hand, simply in order to have access to the cult and its priests, he needed to invoke the gods, perform the necessary sacrifices, consult divinatory oracles, and (last but certainly not least for an ethnomusicologist) to apprentice himself to learn to play the brekete drum. Freidson eloquently conveys the difficulties of conforming to the Brekete way (he had special problems with cat sacrifices, involving removing the lungs and placing them in the dead cat’s mouth) as well as the deeper satisfactions. As he very aptly points out, the problem is not one of belief or unbelief, but of learning to live one’s life in a particular manner.

- 3 Learning to play the brekete drum was, in this regard, absolutely central. This was not primarily, if at all, a matter of acquiring new techniques, but rather of adopting an entirely different paradigm of listening, much less performing, of appropriating new and unfamiliar modes of relating to other performers in the ensemble. For Friedson, Ewe polyrhythm literally embodies Brekete ways of being, neither a duple nor a triple meter but a constantly shifting, dynamic performance transcending European dualities.
- 4 At its best, *Remains of Ritual* is a compelling account of one ethnographer’s visceral, and not simply cerebral, engagement with a radically foreign religious idiom. From time to time, alas, Freidson succumbs to the temptation of facile grandiloquence: e.g., “Divine horsemen ride their mounts in an extravagant immersion into the sensorium of human experience” (p. 40). Such oracular pronouncements aside, the book has the strengths and the weaknesses of its phenomenological approach, forcing the reader to engage with other modes of being on their own terms, but without situating such modes of being in any textured or nuanced history. For some readers, this will be a richly rewarding, and for others a supremely frustrating, book.