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## McCaskie, T. C. – *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village 1850-1950*

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- 1 When I was asked to review McCaskie’s latest book on Asante history, I hesitated at first. In recent decades, Asante history and ethnography have become a rich, multifarious field of specialists’ studies and debates that are often not easily accessible to “outsiders”, like myself, who are researching societies in northern Ghana that lack traditions of pre-colonial statehood and are relatively marginal to the mainstream of Akan-centred studies. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that McCaskie’s book on the history of the Asante village of Adeebaba, on the southern periphery of Kumasi, is, apart from a few sections, highly readable. It also provides an excellent entry for the non-specialist into the changing life-worlds of Asante villagers from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The book abounds with fascinating, illuminating biographies and family histories of Adeebaba residents, carefully analysed, but fortunately hardly ever crushed by the author’s interpretations. These reconstituted micro-histories and first-person narratives give us an idea of what larger historical developments—Asante power politics in the later nineteenth century, the coming of the British and of Christianity around the turn of the century, and colonial “modernity”, with its promises as well as challenges of new mobility and income opportunities, rapid urban growth, schools and literacy, and new markets for spirituality—may have meant for ordinary Asante village men and women. The book roughly follows a chronological order. However, as McCaskie repeatedly emphasises, many processes, institutions and cultural patterns are of the *longue durée*. The advent of colonialism does not constitute the deep rupture between “tradition” and “modernity” into which standard African historiography (and many African interlocutors) tended to

reify it. McCaskie's engaging analysis of the Adeebaba microcosmos and its embeddedness in larger historical developments, some degree of autonomy and contingency notwithstanding, is indeed impressive. Whether his views on the "dearth of African microhistories" (p. 21) (a remark that enables him to turn himself into a pioneer) and his rather self-righteous critique of the works of others, which he dismisses as "presentist ethnographies" and "moral historiographies" (pp. 21-22, 239-240), can be accepted is another question. Maybe not everybody had the luck to come across the kind of material that was at McCaskie's disposal.

- 2 To write such an impressively detailed portrait of a village was possible only because of the extraordinarily rich fund of data on which McCaskie could draw by virtue of his own life-long involvement with Asante in general and Adeebaba (and the Manwere stool, to which Adeebaba belongs) in particular, and his privileged access to the enormous wealth of material from the Ashanti Social Survey. In 1945-1946, a team of Asante researchers, fluctuating between 30 and 65 teachers, students and government employees, conducted extensive fieldwork over eighteen months under the leadership of the anthropologist Meyer Fortes, the geographer R.W. Steel and the economist and statistician P. Ady in Kumasi and more than a dozen Asante villages, among them Adeebaba. Fortes' interest was "to study a people [the Asante] who have been caught up in the full tide of social and cultural change due to western influence" (quoted in McCaskie, p. 1). However, Fortes' own analyses concentrated on the quantitative data from censuses, surveys and statistics, and most of the qualitative material of the Social Survey remained unused. For decades, the files were locked up in boxes, a smaller part in Fortes' house and the bulk in a garage at Steel's residence, until McCaskie was given access to both parts of the collection in the 1980s.
- 3 For McCaskie, who is aiming to produce a village history within the programmatic framework of Italian *microstoria* and German *Alltagsgeschichte*, this qualitative material, partly in Twi and partly in English, constituted "an immensely rich archive of everyday life, difficult to use because of its disordered complexity, but rewarding in its close-grained revelations of detail and nuance" (p. 5). The introduction to *Asante Identities* traces the history and methodology of the Ashanti Social Survey in some detail. It also reflects, albeit briefly, on the conditions under which the narratives of (Adeebaba) villagers, which are amply quoted in subsequent chapters of the book, were produced and recorded. The reader learns that the Social Survey researchers often came from the researched villages themselves or from neighbouring settlements, and that they were frequently familiar with their interlocutors, a circumstance which turned the interviews into a "conversation rather than interrogation, a confiding disclosure rather than a submitting of evidence" (p. 5). As an anthropologist, I would have been curious to know more about the ways in which the researchers' status and perspectives may have influenced the interlocutors' self-presentations. The monologue style of presentation of the Adeebaba villagers' narratives throughout McCaskie's book makes it difficult to reconstruct the dialogical character of the original research (the questions asked, the local interpretations of the aims of the Survey, the specific relationship between researcher and interlocutor). Possibly, one could not have gleaned much more than McCaskie did from the surviving records because the Asante researchers' interventions had already been erased in the original field notes. But perhaps it is also McCaskie's avowed antipathy towards recent trends of overly self-reflexive ethnography that makes him wary of speculating on the methodological

status of the narratives of his Adeebeba “witnesses” (p. 22), apart from a general, more philosophical, and rather complicated discussion of the epistemological implications of biographical narratives (pp. 117-119). However, this methodological caveat is a minor objection. On the whole, the author’s reconstruction of Adeebeba villagers’ lives and conflicts, “on their own terms, and in their own words”, is convincing and allows important insights into past subjectivities, as well as the “macro-historical environment” in which Adeebeba lives were fashioned (p. 22).

- 4 The second chapter of the book reconstructs the beginnings of Adeebeba in the 1840s and its development up until the establishment of colonial rule. After the introductory promise of a “history of everyday life”, “from below”, of ordinary people, the uninitiated reader may experience some frustration when struggling through the first twenty or so pages of what appears like a rather conventional dynastic history of the Asantehene and his relations with Kwasi Brantuo, the “founder” of Adeebeba. However, it soon becomes clear that the Kumasi-centred grid of chiefs, royal servants and Big Men, and their intricate struggles over power, is the stuff out of which much of Adeebeba history was made. Whether an Asante village prospered or, as was soon the case with Adeebeba, was marginalised and more or less left to its own devices under the “absentee” overlordship of a rather powerless divisional chief was a question ultimately decided by the powerholders in Kumase, not in the village itself. When the rest of the second chapter then provides details on the background of the first settlers in Adeebeba, the composition of the village territory, the basic facts of local economic life, the villagers’ marriage strategies, and the history of the village shrine, *taa kwabena bena*, and its custodian, the place comes more and more alive in the reader’s imagination. Of particular interest are McCaskie’s cautious attempts to extrapolate, from the scanty evidence available, how Adeebeba villagers may have experienced, and lived through, the upheavals wrought on Asante society by British invasion and civil war in the 1870s and 1880s, the deportation of the Asantehene, and the Anglo-Asante war of 1900-1901. From what can be gleaned from the narratives gathered in 1945, the villagers’ reactions to and involvement in wider Asante politics ranged from active support of the rebellion to welcoming the British defeat of the chiefs, whom some considered “worthless”, oppressive and only interested in their own glory (p. 78).
- 5 Fascinating and readable as this chapter is, I cannot spare the author a critical remark on the extremely frequent use of Asante terms—not only in this chapter, but throughout the book. Sometimes Asante concepts are explicitly and usefully discussed, such as the Twi words used for “history” (pp. 235-236), which allows important insights into local perspectives. At other times, the retention of the original Twi terms may be justified because the English translation may not be sufficiently congenial. But on many occasions, the insertion of Twi words or phrases, occasionally without the English translation, is of interest only to the specialist reader or is perhaps meant to enhance the author’s authority. This writing strategy, well known in anthropology but less so in history, tends to make the object of enquiry appear more exotic than is perhaps necessary. I am not sure whether this kind of “distancing” of Asante lives from the non-Asante(ised) reader was McCaskie’s intention, but the author should at least have provided a glossary to save one from having to leaf laboriously through the book in search of the meaning of certain terms.
- 6 The brief third chapter presents three fascinating case studies of Adeebeba events and biographies that allow an exploration, among other things, of the tensions between

community and individual projects in pre-colonial and colonial times: the rituals and discussions surrounding the inexplicable death of an Adeebeba man in 1908, which ended with the flight of the communally accused “scapegoat” from the village; the disputes in the late 1920s between fathers and sons who, by following the new fashion of male circumcision, disrespected Asante “custom” and insisted on their personal autonomy; and the biography of a prosperous Kumasi business man of Adeebeba origins, who described himself as “a modern Ashanti man” (p. 114), saw Asante’s future as depending on “education”, and elaborated on his burdensome obligations to support his family and fellow villagers. McCaskie uses these case studies, as well as a discussion of the works of two Asante philosophers, to address a wide range of themes: local (and academic) understandings of “modernity”, discursive practices and their importance for the constitution of community, the language of witchcraft, and the ambiguous role of literacy (and Christianity). This chapter contains stimulating insights, and is probably central to the author’s project of understanding Adeebeba’s involvement with “colonial modernity” (p. 116). However, even with a fairly solid background in German philosophy (Frege and Habermas, on whom McCaskie draws), I found it difficult to follow the author’s meandering argumentation and dense style. One is left with a sense that something important is being said, but cannot quite grasp what. What is one to make, for instance, of sentences like these: “In short, modernity in Asante was about the authorisation of culturally specific historical conjunctures of enunciation and address, and within this project the exercise of colonial power acted upon pre-existing terms of reference and inference and set new ones. Modernity’s processes and effects were determined by historical authorisation but not predetermined by epistemological authorship” (p. 122).

- 7 After these tortuous sections, the fourth chapter on Adeebeba experiences during the first decades of the twentieth century comes as a relief. It artfully interweaves intriguing life histories and personal narratives with an analysis of the broad range of meanings that colonial modernity assumed for villagers, in detail and in everyday life. The chapter focuses on the new scope for geographic (and social) mobility and income opportunities, the impact of the growing city of Kumasi on the peripheral villages, the contested gender relations and, through the lens of the fate of the custodian of the village’s most important shrine and her family, changing spiritual and religious commitments. The section on changing relations between men and women in particular, narrated from both male and female perspectives, contains highly illuminating case studies and brilliant analyses by the author. I was astonished by the frankness with which the Adeebeba interlocutors of the Ashanti Social Survey talked about their often frustrated amorous liaisons and marital lives. Another section of the chapter convincingly elucidates the increase in witchcraft discourses. It is beyond the scope of this review to go into more detail on the many insights one can gain into everyday life under colonial rule. One of the overarching themes in the personal narratives “of self-fashioning” that the author presents in this chapter is “the quest for ‘due recognition’” (p. 178).
- 8 The last chapter, finally, takes the narrative(s) beyond the time of the Ashanti Social Survey into the 1950s, showing succinctly how old configurations of chiefly power were revived and, in part, contested, and how conflicts over chieftaincy intermingled with party politics and with attempts to gain control over the increasingly profitable market for building plots. For lack of material, one does not learn much about the further “self-fashioning” of Adeebeba biographies: the narrative concentrates on larger political,

“structural” developments. However, there is a fascinating account of a meeting between the author and a small group of Asante Christians who have created their very own synthesis of Biblical and Asante history. McCaskie uses this encounter as a starting point for an interesting reflection on the permeability of the boundary between “episodic (autobiographical) and semantic (historical) memory” (p. 235) and on the Asante understanding of histor(iograph)y as communication, deeply entrenched in an oral culture. “It is felt”, the author explains, “that writing is not really the way in which to tend the best interests of oneself, for such necessary husbandry depends upon face-to-face communication with others. ... Asante attitudes towards literacy... continue to be conditioned by a hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 236). However, one may still wonder what use future Adeedeba men and women, or chiefs interested in boosting their historical claims in the profitable urban land market, may make of McCaskie’s written history of their village. In any case, one would like to read about their reactions to this book.