



TIMO KALLINEN

Divine Rulers in a Secular State

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7th November 2015

Timo Kallinen

Introduction

... [W]e are tired of chieftaincy affairs! Why? March 2010, March, 2010, we are still glorifying the chieftaincy institution, what is that institution? The most undemocratic institution, how does one become a chief? It is based on blood relations. One's ancestor's [sic] went to conquer this one and conquered that one. They were slave-raiders and so on, and therefore one is a chief. That is the basis of selecting chiefs. No democracy in it at all!

Ghanaian journalist Kwesi Pratt on a live FM radio show
(transcript at theodikro.blogspot.com 23rd March 2010).

In the old Testament, Moses got the new Laws from the mountains and directly from the one and only God we cannot see but feel in our spirit, and among the laws or Commandments of God he made were: THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP IDOLS. Nana, I know some of the Chiefs are Christians, and still do this blood over stone sacrifice. Do you think that conflicts with the new post Moses Ten commandments? I have been trying to find out the root cause of our underdevelopment, and [...] I am convinced there is some kind of curse associated with certain behavior and acts of humans in any society. Not to list all of them but Idol worshipping is one of them, which is also listed in the Bible as against the ten commandments.

A posting in an internet discussion group
(Ghana Leadership Forum 20th August 2011).

The two quotes above exemplify the conflicting views expressed on the topic of traditional chieftaincy in contemporary Ghana. Chiefs are nowadays a common subject of public discussions – about good governance, democracy, development, civil society, and the like – which address whether, and how, ‘traditional political institutions’ could co-exist with, or become a part of, modern government. Many have recently argued that a ‘true’ or ‘direct’ democracy must be dependent on the consensus of local communities represented by their traditional leaders. In this scenario, the chiefs should also have a positive role in the socio-economic development of the country (see e.g. Gyapong 2006; Ray and Eizlini 2004; Wiredu 2000). The critics, on the other hand, maintain that customary authority based on hereditary succession runs counter to the values of electoral democracy,

drawing attention, perhaps, to the prevalent abuses of chiefly power as well as recurring conflicts over succession and land rights (see, e.g., Afrane 2000; Tsikata and Seini 2004; Ubink 2007). In this light, chieftaincy is perceived as a secular political institution comparable with those of the modern administrative state. This debate is taking place among politicians, civil servants, journalists, scholars, and civil society activists.

However, as the second quote indicates, there is also another significant public debate going on in today's Ghana about chieftaincy that seems to have only a little to do with politics, one that is carried on mainly by the members of some Christian churches, particularly those that belong to the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement that has flourished in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa since the 1980s. These debates emphasize the chief's role as a ritual leader who performs sacrifices on behalf of his community. Since the divinities and rituals associated with traditional religion are considered unchristian and immoral, chieftaincy too has assumed a negative character and is perceived as a 'pagan institution' or, as some Ghanaian Christians would put it, a form of 'idol worship'. This religious discourse on chiefs has recently expanded its presence in the public sphere as the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches have gained better access to audiovisual mass media (see, e.g., Meyer 1998a; 1998b; 2006). Although these discussions are very contemporary, increasingly taking place in broadcast and social media, they have a long history that stretches back to the era of colonial rule and missionary Christianity.

In this book I argue that closer examination of the debates concerning traditional chieftaincy helps us better understand the processes of secularization in Ghana and other post-colonial societies, thereby bringing a standard topic of classical ethnography into more current and far-reaching discussions about the idea of modernity itself. In a general sense, secularization could be defined as a process in modern society whereby divinity is separated from the ways in which human society is regulated and physical nature is understood to function (De Pina-Cabral 2001, 329; see Latour 1991, 32–35). More specifically, this book focuses on two different but related aspects of secularization. First, studying the recent history of the chieftaincy institution helps us to chart a structural transformation in which a colonized African society was divided into spheres of politics and religion. How were the different ideas, practices, and institutions of local worlds distributed between these two domains? What sorts of negotiations were entailed and how has this dichotomy been contested? Second, by examining the changes in the religious role of the chiefs we are able to address the question of the kind of religiosity that is acceptable in a modern secular Ghana. Which types of spiritual ideas, practices, and institutions are considered objectionable in terms of modern sensibilities and therefore excluded from the category of religion? Have the spiritual forces of the traditional cosmology or the Christian God been granted agency in political relations or are they treated as transcendent objects of individual beliefs?

There has been a growing interest in secularist ideologies and secularization in general among anthropologists in recent times (see, e.g., Asad 2003; Bowen 2010; Cannell 2010; Özyürek 2006), and scholars have

started to ask what exactly the anthropological perspective can offer to their study. Too often secularization is accorded a taken-for-granted quality and consequently it is implicitly suggested that the history of Western modernity has been, and is being, repeated in other parts of the world. Hence, a call for “genuine comparative anthropology of secularisms” based on particular ethnographic and historical studies has been raised (Cannell 2010, 86). Hopefully, this book will have a part to play in that.

Kingship in the postcolony

The history of this book is closely linked to a particular era in African and global politics which coincides with my own research career on Ghana and the Asante people. In recent literature this post-Cold War period has been characterized by a ‘resurgence’ or even a ‘renaissance’ of traditional chieftaincy in many parts of Africa – although certainly not everywhere. Consequently, many analysts have pondered why and how chieftaincy has persisted through all the enormous political, economic, and social changes of the colonial and post-colonial periods, and the “resilience of chieftaincy” has become something of a popular notion in Africanist anthropology, history, development studies, political science, legal studies, and other related disciplines (see, e.g., Englebert 2002; Ntsebeza 2005, 16–35; Ubink 2008, 13–31; Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and Van Dijk 1999).

In the late 1990s when I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on Asante chieftaincy I was fascinated by similar questions. As a person who had lived all his life in a modern, bureaucratic-state society I was amazed by the simple fact that chiefs still existed in Africa: this, I thought, demanded explanation. Accordingly, the very first research proposal that I submitted to my supervisors was titled “Natural Attenuation?”, a critical allusion to Kwame Nkrumah’s (1964, 84) famous assertion made in the 1960s that chieftaincy would disappear under the impact of “social progress”. Subsequent fieldwork in 2000-01 gave me the impression that chieftaincy really was as strong as ever and I thought that we might indeed be living a renaissance of a sort. A new king of Asante – the *Asantehene* – had just been elected and installed. He was a youngish man with an overseas business background who made bold, no-nonsense statements about putting an end to local disputes over traditional offices and engaging all his chiefs in work for development. During those early days of his reign he enjoyed great popularity not only in Asante but also elsewhere in the country. The media reported his activities and statements in an admiring tone, photos and paintings of him adorned the walls of shops and bars, crowds greeted him by chanting his nickname “King Solomon” when he moved through the city of Kumasi with his retinue of cars, and so on. Amidst all this, however, I became immersed in the social and cosmological principles that ordered the chiefly hierarchies among the Asante and questions about resilience and resurgence were relegated to the background (see Kallinen 2004). Ultimately, it is doubtful if I wrote anything truly original about chieftaincy’s relation to modernity at the time (see, e.g., Kallinen 2006).

Today, I am rather sceptical of the whole notion of resilience and this time around I believe I have something new to say about chieftaincy in colonial and post-colonial eras and beyond. As noted above, the presence of traditional leaders in the political arena of African states in the 1990s – an epoch marked by the introduction of multi-party democracy and neoliberal economic reforms in many countries of the continent – quickly caught the attention of social scientists. Consequently, chiefs were also given a role in the grand theories about political processes in the region (see, e.g., Bayart 1993; Herbst 2000; Mamdani 1996). What many of the studies of that era have in common is the assumption of a separate political sphere of society, where institutions, agents, or groups compete, co-operate, or co-exist. These studies define, even if implicitly, politics as that which relates to power, which is what both traditional chiefships and modern states are supposedly all about. Conversely, even a superficial glance at the classic ethnographies of African societies reveals that the kings and chiefs of the pre-colonial era were not ‘political’ leaders in the same sense as modern political theory suggests. They were characterized as diviners, healers, priests, magicians, rain-makers, or controllers of witchcraft, and the origins of their offices were traced to the spiritual realm (see, e.g., Forde 1991 [1954]; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940]). The contemporary political theorists who write about chiefs rarely address this spiritual quality of the chiefly office, not to mention that of the whole community over which the chiefs ruled. Of course, the differences between the classics and present-day post-colonial theorization could be attributed to a number of factors and, indeed, the classics have received their share of criticism concerning their heavy emphasis on the unifying function of shared religious values (Asad 1973, 270–271; Fields 1985, 64–66), their biased methodological choices (Stewart and Strathern 2002, 19–20), commitment to “equilibrium models” of political systems (Bailey 1990 [1969], 12–18), and so forth. Nevertheless, despite these often well-grounded critical points, it would be very difficult to deny that religion and ritual had a central place in African pre-colonial social formations.

A comparable inconsistency was very much evident during my fieldwork in the form of the two separate public discourses on chieftaincy that are represented at the beginning of this chapter. On the one hand, I could, for example, read a letter to the editor in a newspaper about how the hereditary succession to chiefships should be abolished and chiefs should be voted to office by the people; or I could listen to a phone-in radio show where a concerned listener was demanding greater transparency with regards the fees chiefs received from timber concessions or mining rights. But, on the other hand, I could also talk to members of chiefly families who were ‘born-again Christians’ and refused to become chiefs because they considered sacrificing to the ancestors and gods ‘satanic.’ Or I might hear stories about chiefs visiting the shrines of famous divinities, located possibly hundreds of kilometres away from their home towns, in order to seek out prophesies and protective medicines. It was almost as though the institution of chieftaincy addressed by these two discourses was two distinct things functioning according to two different sets of principles. Observations such as these, coupled with the gaps in the scholarly literature, made me seriously think

that it might be more pertinent to look at the ruptures and breaks in the history of chieftaincy rather than tracing continuities. These ideas fully hit home after completing another spell of fieldwork in 2006 when it also became obvious that it was necessary to take a new look at the historical source materials.

Yet what happened to the divinity of the kingships and chiefships in Africa still does not seem to be an important question for contemporary political theory. My contention is that this omission has left us poorly equipped to understand the nature of colonial and post-colonial-era developments. For instance, it has become more or less commonplace to argue that the post-colonial states have inherited the power structures of the colonial era or, more precisely, the central governments have sought to rule the rural populations by using local chiefs or ‘big men’ as their middlemen and clients, in the same vein as the European indirect rule system (see, e.g., Hansen and Stepputat 2005; 2006; Mamdani 1996; Piot 2010). I have no objections to this claim as such, but I find it intriguing that the process of annexing sacred kingships and chiefships to secular political machinery is not usually problematized by the analysts. How are god-like figures transformed into political instruments and with what consequences? What sort of process is entailed in converting high priests into local-level bureaucrats? Instead of tackling these questions, there rather seems to be an underlying assumption that they were all ‘political’ institutions and thus somehow commensurable. Or conversely, what should we think when we read about the ways that common perceptions of modern political leaders are influenced by ideas that used to be connected to sacred kingship in different parts of Africa (see, e.g., Ashforth 1998; Taylor 2004)? Religious ideas and ritual functions seem to have become separated from political institutions but, obviously, not entirely. It appears that in a relatively short time, the central institutions of African societies have transformed radically and this alteration is not primarily a question of political oscillation between democracy and autocracy, consensus and coercion, or transparency and secrecy. It rather has to do with the quality of the institutions and the structures of the societies, where they exist. If such a transformation has actually taken place, to what extent is it then fruitful to discuss African chieftaincy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries within the rubric of resilience?

Since questions like these have been left largely untouched, the tropes of inescapable processes of rationalization and disenchantment are looming in the background as presuppositions about the nature of modernity. Such views cannot be taken for granted and hence it is time to look more closely into how the category of politics, in contradistinction to religion, came into being in colonial societies. What has this African secularization been like? Was it to some extent comparable to the shift that took place in the relations between the church and the state in Western Europe in the period between the sixth and eighteenth centuries? Has it been inevitable and is it leading toward similar ideological concerns and dilemmas about religion and politics that are prevalent in the contemporary West? As a recent observer points out, the exploration of these kinds of questions is still “either completely lacking in the literature or in a state of infancy” (Van Dijk 2015, 215). In

this book I illuminate this transformation by analyzing the processes of, and pressures for, secularization that developed with regards the sacred kingship and chiefship among the Asante. One should be very careful in making generalizations but I hope to establish that questions raised in the course of analysis are definitely worth asking in the contexts of cases from other parts of Africa and elsewhere in the former colonized world.

Theoretical outlook

The ethnographic focus of the book is directed towards transformations in divine kingship and chiefship of the Asante people of central Ghana.¹ Analysis is primarily inspired by the work of Louis Dumont (especially 1971; 1980; 1992 [1986]). One of his main interests lay in studying how holistic, or traditional, societies become individualistic, or modern, as a result of an internal process of transformation. As Jonathan Parry (1998, 153) has pointed out, Dumont inherited from his teacher Marcel Mauss an interest in studying “the progressive fragmentation of an originally unified conceptual order”. Much like Mauss (1966 [1954]), who had pondered how modern economic exchanges and relationships had developed from the “total prestations” of “archaic societies”, Dumont was interested in how the domains of politics and the economy had become separated from the previously all-encompassing category of religion. In his work secularization, whether it concerned the differentiation between kingly and priestly orders in India (Dumont 1980 [1966], 287–313), or church and state in Europe (Dumont 1992 [1986], 60–103), was a historical development – an evolution of a sort (Parry 1998, 151–153). Dumont (1992 [1986], 1–52; 60–72) traced the origins of Western secularism to Christian thinking prior to the emergence of the modern state and the Enlightenment. Similar genealogical accounts of the development of secularism have ensued more recently, most prominently Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). In this book I also ask how traditional Asante society, as an undifferentiated order, where the ‘political’ was not separated from the ‘religious’, came to be divided into spheres of politics and religion: an arrangement distinctive to the modern West. I further argue that missionary Christianity, an individualistic religion that posits great importance in ruptures and change, has had a significant effect in the process (see Robbins 2007; 2012).

Drawing inspiration from Dumont and applying his approach to the Asante material does not come without problems. First, the developments in the colonial and post-colonial contexts of Africa are not like the transition from traditional to modern with which Dumont himself dealt. European

1 The Asante people belong to a larger ethnic and language group called the Akan. The Akan people live in the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. In Ghana they are the largest ethnic and language group constituting roughly 40% of the total population. The Akan language and its dialects are classified under the Tano language family, including Asante Twi, Fante, and Akuapem, which also have their own distinctive written forms.

colonial expansion was the medium through which Western secularism became globalized. As José Casanova (2010, 273–274) puts it, non-Western societies “did not undergo a similar process of historical development but instead always confronted Western secular modernity from their first encounter with European colonialism as ‘the other’”. In colonial Ghana the disintegration of the religious order had a sudden and aggressive nature and hence it cannot be discussed in terms of evolution, following Dumont. Second, binaries like traditional / modern, holistic / individualistic, and non-Western / Western have proved problematic in many ways and no longer have much purchase in present-day anthropology. It is often understood that the application of such binaries constitutes a form of “epistemic violence”, in which the categories and distinctions of local realities are forced into the binary mould of modernist social science, thereby removing the phenomena being studied from their actual social and historical contexts (see, e.g., Clifford 1986; Spivak 1988). However, it should be underlined that the conceptual pairs Dumont utilized in his analysis were not mutually exclusive, and both holistic and individualistic elements can be discerned in all cultures, even though differently valued (Siikala 2014, 215–216). Hence, if we accept traditional and modern societies as ideal-typical models without assuming any necessary evolutionary or historical relationship between them, we will be able to have a more comprehensive view of the impacts of Christian conversion and secularist ideology in Asante. Starting from the holistic configuration of traditional society, wherein politics is not defined separately from religion, helps us to understand how in a specific place and historical instance certain ideas and practices came to constitute the secular. After all, modern categories were not simply duplicated in an African setting: what became understood as ‘political’ and what ‘religious’ was a result of complicated orderings and negotiations, where nothing could be taken for granted. To put it in more concrete terms, we are not merely discussing ‘changing beliefs’ or ‘church-state relations’ but an overarching transformation that touched not only belief and ritual but also such seemingly mundane issues as, for example, village living arrangements, forms of collective labour, or extraction of natural resources. I believe that the Dumontian perspective, which does not assume Western categories as a starting point, will help us to avoid the pitfalls of those approaches that take the ‘political’ nature of chieftaincy as a given. Not surprisingly, Dumont’s theories have recently been used fruitfully in the analysis of cultural change in the context of globalization (see Robbins and Siikala 2014), and one goal of my study is to contribute to these discussions.

Although Dumont presented a critique of Western secularism, he was above all interested in the development and comparison of ideologies and did not comment on the political dimensions of secularization, for instance, with regards to colonialism. Yet Talal Asad (1993; 2003) has underlined secularist ideology as an important instrument of statecraft and criticized those commentators who have emphasized its liberating and redemptive qualities. For instance, Taylor’s (1998, 38–53) claim that secularism is the only option if a pluralistic democratic state is to work has been emphatically opposed by Asad. When Taylor asserts that in order to avoid hierarchies and

In present-day Africa chiefs interact fluently with modern states, international organizations, and business corporations, and traditional chieftaincy is perceived essentially as a secular institution. Consequently, social scientists have started paying serious attention to the role of traditional authorities in contemporary political landscapes. Yet it was only a few decades ago that classic ethnographers were characterizing chiefs as priests, magicians, diviners, rainmakers, and the like. What happened to the divinity of African chiefs and kings?

Drawing on his research on the Asante people of Ghana, West Africa, Timo Kallinen explores how the colonial and postcolonial states have attempted to secularize the sacred institutions of chiefship and kingship, a process which is by no means complete. Furthermore, it has frequently proved a problematic undertaking with regards to a number of burning issues in contemporary Ghanaian society, such as Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, nationalism, international development aid, civil society participation, coup d'états, and witchcraft.

Timo Kallinen teaches Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki.



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