



Diviners, Malams, God, and the Contest for Paramount Chiefship in Mamprugu (Northern Ghana)

Steve Tonah

Abstract. – This article analyses the contest for paramount chiefship in Mamprugu, one of the traditional states in northern Ghana. It examines the role that spiritualists such as diviners and malams play in the contest. The first part provides an overview of Mamprusi traditional political system and the province of Wungu, from which this case study is taken. This is followed by an analysis of Traditional African Religion and Islam, the two dominant religious practices in the area. Finally, the article examines the contest for paramount chiefship in 2001 and the specific role that spiritualists such as diviners and malams play during the contest. [*Northern Ghana, Mamprusi, chieftaincy succession, Islam, traditional religion, power, traditional politics*]

Steve Tonah, Dr., since 1999 working as a Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Ghana. – His main research interests are in the area of interethnic relations, Fulani pastoralism in West Africa, and chieftaincy in Ghana. He has also conducted extensive research into these areas throughout Ghana and in southern Burkina Faso. – He has published in journals such as *Africa*, *Africa Spectrum*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Legon Journal of Sociology*, and *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. – See also References Cited.

Introduction

In spite of the fact that traditional rulers in Ghana, just as in many West African countries, have lost most of their legislative, administrative, and judicial powers to leaders of nation-states created during the colonial period, the institution of chieftaincy appears to have lost little of its legitimacy and attraction amongst the population in many parts of the country. Indeed, chieftaincy has proven to be a very resilient institution in Ghana. This is because in spite of the denigration and the humiliation that

the institution suffered during the colonial and the immediate postcolonial period, chieftaincy has not only survived (to the amazement of those who had prophesied its gradual demise) but has remained popular amongst large sections of the Ghanaian population. Not even the widely pervasive views that chieftaincy has become increasingly associated with protracted disputes and conflicts, an unending struggle for land and power, corruption, and the increasing polarization of the society appear to have substantially diminished the reverence that admirers of the institution have for it.

Several reasons have been adduced for the growing interest in chieftaincy and for its survival against all odds. These include the continuing allegiance of large sections of the population, including in recent times the educated elite, to their traditional leadership; the inability to create a national identity out of the numerous ethnic groups forced together into a nation-state; the continuing association of chieftaincy with power and wealth; and the flexibility of the institution and its ability to adapt to the changing political order of the postcolonial period.

The chieftaincy institution continues to be very vibrant in many parts of West Africa and has coped very well with the challenges of the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Though with little administrative and legislative powers within the nation-state, chieftaincy positions are still very much sought after, and competition for high office in many traditional areas in Ghana remains very keen. In northern Ghana, the competition for high