

traditional office is particularly fierce amongst the centralized, hierarchical states of Dagbon, Mamprugu, Nanun, and Gonja. In Dagbon, the bitter struggle between the two royal clans (Abudu and Andani) has resulted in a protracted internecine conflict (Alhassan 2004; Ladouceur 1972). In the neighbouring traditional state of Nanun, conflicts between the gates of Gbugmayili and Banyili have characterised succession to the Bimbilla Naa (Skalník 1987). Similarly, fierce internecine conflicts between various individuals and clans are associated with the competition to high traditional office in Wa and Nandom in northwestern Ghana (Lentz 1993, 2000; Wilks 1989).

The Mamprusi of northern Ghana, about whom this article is about, have a strong devotion to chieftaincy and traditional rule. Indeed, becoming a chief or a titled person is the most cherished achievement of all persons of royal descent and large sections of the population. Most Mamprusi royals spend a considerable amount of their time, energy, and resources seeking for chieftaincy positions. Chiefs are very much revered in the society and becoming a chief is one of the quickest routes to power, prestige, and wealth within the Mamprusi society. The competition for chiefship positions at all levels of the political hierarchy is, therefore, intense, fierce, full of passion, excitement, and fear. Competitors in any chieftaincy contest usually employ to the fullest, their personal skills and bravado, kinship network, economic resources, and spiritual fortitude.

This article analyses the contest for paramount chiefship in Mamprugu, one of the traditional states in northern Ghana. It examines how the contestants use religion and religious leaders in their quest for chiefship positions. In particular, the article looks at the role that spiritualists such as diviners and malams play in the extremely competitive 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 the development 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 played during the contest.

Theoretical Considerations on Power in Africa

Recent studies on power and the political system in African countries have focused mainly on the

nature of governance and the type of leadership exhibited in many of these postcolonial nation-states. Generally, governance in most African states has been described as being largely characterized by personal rule and the patrimonialism of power and authority structures by the rulers (Callaghy 1994:202). African states, it is argued, do not have well-developed and functional political institutions. They have also not evolved basic institutions that guide and constrain political behaviour. Power is concentrated in the leader of the regime and a core group of associates that constitute the executive arm of government. The leaders control the judiciary and the legislative arm of government by filling these positions with their own cronies or persons who would uncritically accept their positions and viewpoints. Politics and the contest for political power thus becomes a "game played mainly for self-interest, expediency and necessity, without legitimate and restraining rules" (Dzorgbo 1998:71). Even in states that inherited a fairly well-established tradition of the separation of powers with clearly laid down rules, these rules are often overridden by the wishes of the leaders. Constitutions may describe the formal arrangement of governance in many of these states, but, in reality, power usually resides in the leader. The winner takes all mentality is pervasive and there is increasingly less room for political opponents to operate.

A second major theme that has dominated the literature on governance in the postcolonial states of Africa is the direct relationship between access to political power and the accumulation of wealth. Political power is sought not merely for the prestige that is associated with the position but because it offers the leaders and their cronies a quicker and easier means to obtain wealth, prestige, and status within the society. Political leaders and their close confidants are offered privileged and illegitimate access to state resources (Jackson and Rosberg 1994). Clapham (1985:48) indicates that "officials hold positions in bureaucratic organisations with power which are formally defined, but exercise power, so far as they can, as a form not of public service but of private property." Similarly, Callaghy (1994:205) argues that "the state in Africa, directly or indirectly, has definitely been the major avenue of upward mobility and accumulation." Following a pattern set during the colonial period, the political leadership in many African countries extracted substantial resources from the produce of large sections of society. Part of the revenue is obtained from the export of primary agricultural commodities such