

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Barker: **Peoples, Languages and Religion in Northern Ghana** (A preliminary report). Ghana Evangelism Committee in association with Asempa Publishers, Accra, 1986. Maps, Preface, Abbreviations, Tables, Index. 318 pp. Price: £1,200.00 (Legon University Bookshop).

The author sets out to describe the peoples of Northern Ghana in relation to their social organisations, their cultural histories, languages and their responses to Christianity and Islam.

The book discusses 37 groups from the Northern and the two Upper Regions of Ghana and the northern parts of the Brong Ahafo and Volta Regions. Those Brong Ahafo and Volta Region peoples are included perhaps because they share affinities with the Northern Ghana peoples.

The introductory chapter outlines the physical features of Northern Ghana, the languages of the area and their genetic classification. There is also a general discussion of non-traditional religious denominations involved in the area drawing attention to their organisation, size, participation in literary work and their contributions to rural development. The section on Islam is very informative, tracing the history of this religion in West Africa, its tenets, practices as well as its general influence in Northern Ghana. The writer draws readers' attention to the fact that Islam in this area is not on the wane and Christianity not necessarily on the ascendancy.

The rest of the book discusses the various peoples of the North individually. They are identified by language and ethnonyms and grouped together on the basis of language relationships. The majority of the people speak Gur languages but Kwa and Mande language speakers too are represented. Distinct sections or chapters are allocated to each of these superordinate linguistic groupings. It has to be pointed out however that 'Gur', 'Kwa', 'Mande' are categories introduced by linguists and that they are not recognised by the peoples involved. There is for example nothing like Gur identity as an emic category. The author sub-classifies Gur into Oti-Volta peoples and Grusi peoples. Each of these sub-classes are further divided into sub-sub-groupings identified by directional labels. The designation at this point becomes confusing and could mislead readers who lack a rudimentary knowledge of these peoples. For example, the Grusi peoples comprise 'West Ghana', 'North Ghana' and 'East Ghana'. 'Grusi' should be substituted for 'Ghana' in these labels. This is what Bendor-Samuel does in his article, 'Niger-Congo Gur', published in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, Vol.7.

For most of the 37 peoples discussed, the book provides in outline, information on the size of the area, main settlements or towns as well as population. The size of the current population is based on an extrapolation of the 1960 Census Statistics but independent estimates are also included.

The description of the linguistic situation deals with ethnonyms, and languages of out-group and in-group communication. Invariably Hausa is mentioned as the trade language and occasionally Twi too is given. When the author says in p.123 that among Mamprusi 'Twi is the main trade language but some Hausa is also spoken, especially by lorry drivers' one wonders whether he did not actually mean that Hausa is the main trade language. Hausa is widely understood by Mamprusi people.

The author indicates invariably the size of the Muslim and Christian populations for each group of people discussed. Christian churches are grouped into Protestant and Catholic and compared with respect to their size, distribution and levels of commitment. In a few cases (such as the Anufo) a detailed account of missionary activity is provided from which lessons are drawn. Islam does not usually receive such an exhaustive treatment except in the Introductory Chapter. Indigenous religious beliefs and practices often fare better than Islam in these accounts. It is regrettable that in a number of cases where the author discusses traditional beliefs, ritual objects are described as 'idols'.

For each ethnic unit the author recounts their folk history, and social, economic and political institutions. In many cases homestead patterns and structures are described. There is a tendency also to over-emphasize polygyny. For the Sisaala, '9 out of 10 marriages are polygamous'; 90 per cent of the older men are polygamous among the Ntrubo etc. Similar statements are made for many other peoples but polygyny is not actually as widespread as it is made to appear. The 1960 Census figures indicate that for Northern Ghana as a whole 67% of married male adults had one wife and the polygynists accounted for only 33% of the population. The statistics show that 76.5% of married male adults had one wife among the Frafra. The percentage drops to 75.6%, 74.4%, 72.2%, 67.4% among the Dagaba, Kusasi, Dagomba and Builsa respectively.

On the issue of polygamy it is necessary to give a definition and to distinguish between synchronic polygamy/polygyny and diachronic polygamy/polygyny. Ideally most men would prefer to have more than one wife but in practice few men succeed in keeping more than one wife at a time. Where however divorce or separation is fairly common most individuals would be polygamists long before they reached the age of forty years because they would have contracted successively several monogamous marriages. Diachronically polygamy would therefore be

common.

The author provides an account of the people's occupations. Invariably they cultivate cereals, legumes and root crops. Some keep cattle as well. They trade and manufacture crafts. Hunting and fishing are practised where resources exist. Wild products are collected, the most important being shea nuts and 'dawadawa' pods. Perhaps the importance of these two products could be further emphasised by indicating that the value of the shea tree (*butyrospermum parkii*) and the locust bean tree (*parkia vilicoidea*) is not confined to their nuts and pods.

Migration is an important issue for many groups. This may take the form of local migrations as practised by Konkomba and Birifor farming communities. Such migrations involving groups rather than individuals usually pose problems for inter-ethnic relations. The author does not however discuss the tensions and conflicts that are sometimes engendered. Migration of individuals towards cosmopolitan areas also occurs. Men go to seek gainful employment. The author says however, that Kulango, Safanra, Vagala, and Deg women go to neighbouring countries or Ghanaian cities to practise prostitution. As an illicit trade hard fact are not readily available about who is engaged in prostitution and for how long. It may not therefore be fair to single out the womenfolk of these ethnic groups as cosmopolitan prostitutes. One hopes that in subsequent editions this will be corrected.

These, together with literacy, are the issues discussed for most of the 37 ethnic groups identified. Some groups have, however, received more attention than others. Groups like Dagaba, Frafra, Dagomba, Anufo etc. have been discussed more extensively but groups like Koma, Chakali, Krachi, have received only the barest minimum of attention. Clearly, availability of source information is a determining factor; however, Tallensi falls in the latter category and this cannot be due to lack of information. Tallensi is one of the best studied societies in Northern Ghana. The author invites readers to supply material to fill the lacunae remaining. I take this cue and will now suggest a more detailed criticism of the book.

The author's approach which confuses language distinctions with ethnic distinctions accounts for some errors. The grouping of peoples into Oti-Volta, Grusi etc. suggests implicitly that some pan-Oti-Volta or pan-Grusi consciousness exists. This is not true; neither is it true that there are cultural areas coinciding with the areas in which Oti-Volta or Grusi languages are spoken. Once language has been equated with ethnic and cultural identity, the ineluctable conclusion of homogeneity is reached and no attempt is made to explore the differences in institutions that might occur. The Dagaba peoples may speak one language but Goody nevertheless encountered differences in

the fact that outside their home area they identify themselves, and are regarded by others, as Frafra. The latter term is in fact a sobriquet for a congeries of people speaking mutually intelligible languages and sharing a more or less homogeneous culture.

The author's estimation of population increase since 1960 is based on extrapolations of the 1960 statistics, yet the size of the increase varies widely between ethnic groups. For example, about 266% is indicated for Konkomba but only 133% for Builsa. Other groups fall between these two. There does not appear to be any explanation of how these differences resulted. For some groups alternative figures are suggested by the author which differ widely from the 1960 Census figures; these too need to be explained.

It is possible that some of these errors are computer social organization among them. Whereas a generalisation such as that among Dagaba 'Every individual belongs to both a patrilineal and a matrilineal clan' or that 'A man inherits farmland and movable property and spiritual functions from his father and also from the mother's line ...' is consistent with the emphasis on homogeneity - Goody distinguishes between cases (a) where movable property is inherited in the uterine line and immovable property in the male (agnatic) line, as among LoDagaba, (b) co-existence of uterine and agnatic lines but the latter functioning as the property transmitting line viz. LoWiili and (c) where patriliney is emphasized, as among the Dagaba. In a similar vein the 'Mamprusi' Tampulma are grouped with the 'Gonja' Tampulma. These two communities speak a common language and once lived together. The northern Tampulma moved to Mamprusi in the pre-colonial era and have now been included in the Mamprusi political structure.

The book in fact shows that in the northern Gonja hinterland some villages and towns are ethnically mixed. Where this is so, cultures are likely to diffuse, particularly as inter-ethnic marriages would occur, and the different ethnic groups would share common institutions like markets. Language differences may not necessarily imply cultural difference, as the Kasena-Nankana communities also illustrate.

In connection with the question of homogeneity and the use of the Ghana Evangelism Committee questionnaire, it might be useful to provide fuller information on informants. Some of these are obviously local people while others are expatriates. Some informants may have grown up or lived in certain parts of the ethnic area for varying lengths of time. While some informants may have studied the groups they wrote about, others may not have undertaken such a systematic study. These details would be required by those readers who wished to evaluate informants' information. One useful piece of advice for comparative work of

this sort is to select informants drawn from different parts of each ethnic area.

The statistics quoted or extrapolated in this book need to be explained and reconciled with other facts. For example, although the 1960 Census report says so, it is difficult to accept that there were only 10 Nabdem in Southern Ghana during the Census period. These people live in the same ecological zone as the Frafra, among whom the emigration rate is high. In both areas agriculture is not too prosperous an occupation; moreover, the population density is high and the lineage has a firm jural control over people. Frafra and Nabdem are culturally similar and they also occupy adjoining territories. Nabdem, it would appear, have as good a reason as Frafra or any other Upper Region peoples for migrating temporarily to Southern Ghana. The insignificant figure recorded for diaspora Nabdem may relate to misprints, though by no means all, such as words that have been mis-spelt. More serious errors occur in the form of repetitions of parts of the text. On page 61, it is doubtful whether the author is referring to two Imamia Muslim Missions or one. The problem stems from repetition and addition of new information. Repetitions occur also in pages 184, 188 and 189. Five lines in page 188 are repeated in page 189. Some of the abbreviations used in the book are also not explained and this applies to the lettering used in diagrams. The map of '19th Century Muslim Empires of the Sudan' includes Ashanti. The basis for this is not clear. Some Ashanti Kings may have had sympathy for Islam but this was more a private matter than state policy.

The author devotes pp.311-317 to Literature in Northern Languages and lists the various books and pamphlets available in the various languages. This list fails to take account of the Bureau of Ghana Languages publications. Surprisingly, only one item has been mentioned for Dagbani viz. the New Testament (1980). The Catholic Mission's booklets in the Kasem language and the Bureau of Ghana Languages publications in this language are omitted. These lacunae could be filled by making enquiries at the right quarters.

In spite of these faults, this book is a valuable account of Northern Ghana peoples. It attempts successfully to bring all the different groups found in the area under the scope of an average sized publication. In doing this, the author has had to seek the support of individuals working in the various parts of the North. He has also done very extensive researches in Ghana and abroad and has consulted published and unpublished sources otherwise unavailable to most readers.

The presentation is simple and the author has preferred simple everyday terms to the specialised anthropological jargon usually found in studies of this sort. The target of the book is the missionary, and secondly peoples of Northern Ghana descent. Both

categories will no doubt find this book useful. So will researchers and scholars interested in Northern Ghana. The reference sources in particular will be very useful to many researchers. One wishes that Peter Barker had also indicated where some of his obscure sources might be found - such as the particular university departments and libraries etc., where Long Essays might be kept.

At ₵1,200.00 the book is moderately priced, relative to similar books. It may encourage the author to know that the book sold out in a short time in Legon in spite of the fact that few students can afford to spend up to ₵1,200.00 on a book.

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