

2006

*An Ethnoarchaeological Analysis of Human Functional Dynamics
in the Volta Basin of Ghana: Before and After the Akosombo Dam,*
by E. Kofi Agorsah

Joanna Casey
University of South Carolina - Columbia, jlc@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/anth_facpub



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Journal of African History*, Volume 47, Issue 1, 2006, pages 170-171.

This Book Review is brought to you by the Anthropology, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON A POSTCOLONIAL CASE

doi:10.1017/S0021853706401729

An Ethnoarchaeological Analysis of Human Functional Dynamics in the Volta Basin of Ghana: Before and After the Akosombo Dam. By E. KOFI AGORSAH. Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003. Pp. xxvi + 407. \$139.95 (ISBN 0-7734-6677-0).

KEY WORDS: Ghana, archaeology, postcolonial.

In the 1960s the massive Akosombo Dam, built on the lower Volta River in Ghana, created the world's largest human-made lake. In anticipation of the flooding, communities were relocated and an enormous amount of research was undertaken to assess the potential and then the actual impact. Kofi Agorsah's stated purpose is to use ethnology, archaeology and oral and written histories to look at how people who were relocated during the flood managed to adapt to their new cultural and natural environments and to provide suggestions as to how future relocation programs in other contexts could be managed more sensitively. Agorsah emphasizes the importance of social relations in community development and argues that government and corporate expediency tends to ignore this factor when developing new communities. Houses, roads and facilities are often placed such that the structural and symbolic integrity of the community are compromised.

Much of the book is devoted to a comparison of Old and New Wiaie, the former an ancient settlement of the Nchumuru people and the latter the place to which they relocated after their town was abandoned. The Nchumuru are organized socially around a system of related families who tend to live in the same sections of the villages and express their solidarity through open-ended compounds that enable free observation and movement of related members. Higher and lower degrees of connectedness are indicated by the placement of communal facilities and shrines. By comparing the ruins of Old Wiaie to the modern village of New Wiaie, Agorsah demonstrates that despite some structural impositions, people adjusted and ultimately maintained critical elements of the community though often in the new forms.

Agorsah provides many insights along the way that are useful to the archaeologist, ethnographer and planner. His excellent work on the life and death of mud-walled structures is invaluable, and his keen eye for the subtleties in compound construction and the placement of material goods are essential reading for anyone who has had the impression that all Africa's ubiquitous mud and thatch compounds are basically the same. Most importantly, Agorsah succeeds in giving a concrete example of the ways in which social values are manifest in the material world. As Merrick Posnansky points out in his foreword to the book, this work is very much enhanced by the fact that Agorsah has spent more than twenty years on this project and is Ghanaian, giving him an enormous empathy and insight into human relationships in the villages. His descriptions of social life, material culture and the relationship between the living, the ancestors and the land (chapters 2–6) are masterfully done, carrying a weight of understanding that is rarely achieved in ethnoarchaeological writing.

Despite this book's positive attributes, its many shortcomings make it difficult to recommend. Of its some 400 references only twenty (six of these by the author) have been written since 1987. Agorsah's approach with its emphasis on social factors, identity, the dynamic relationship between the past and the present and a concern for the lives of the people being studied, is very much in step with contemporary anthropological perspectives, yet his lack of attention to what other people are writing about these topics often makes him appear uninformed. Agorsah

struggles to write about ethnicity, identity and landscapes and he harangues us about the way ethnoarchaeology should be practiced seemingly unaware that the voluminous literature produced on these topics in the past twenty years could have contextualized this study and enabled it to be a significant contribution.

Detracting even further from the book is its absolutely appalling production, which is evident even on the book's cover where the title is made illegible by a busy background. Although Agorsah acknowledges people at the Edwin Mellen Press for their editorial assistance, his thanks are very much misplaced. Apart from Chapters 2–6, which appear to have been edited, the book is extremely disorganized and badly written with spelling and grammatical errors, factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies on virtually every page. In Chapters 7–10, theory, method and data are discussed seemingly at random with topics reappearing in different chapters, often using the same phrases and sentences. The central argument is often complicated by superfluous information such that the purpose and direction of the study periodically become unclear. The index is no help in tracing the disconnected thoughts because it is almost completely wrong. Streamlining the text would make it more coherent and would probably enable the author to recognize the true potential of this work rather than ending with the bland observation that social phenomena leave material traces.

This book is a missed opportunity because poor scholarship and incompetent editing have undermined an illuminating piece of research. While the author bears the responsibility for remaining current and coherent, shame on the Edwin Mellen Press for allowing this book to see publication in its present form.

University of South Carolina

JOANNA CASEY

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN RECENT AFRICAN HISTORY

doi:10.1017/S0021853706411725

Femmes d'Afrique dans une société en mutation. Edited by PHILIPPE DENIS and CAROLINE SAPPIA. Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: Bruylant-Academia, 2004. Pp. 212. €20, paperback (ISBN 2-87209-744-9).

KEY WORDS: Colonial, postcolonial, women, anthropology.

The ten articles incorporated in this collection were drawn from a symposium on women and social change in contemporary Africa held at the Catholic University of Louvain in March 2003. Focused mainly on education, religion and women's status, the studies draw on research set in the Democratic Republic of Congo (three), South Africa (two), Cameroun, Guinée and Kenya. An additional two papers, the first and last, address the question of feminism in contemporary Africa. Two are presented in English and the remainder in French; useful summaries in the other language are included at the volume's end. Nevertheless, there is a Francophone predominance, with nine of the eleven contributors (one article is co-authored) attached to Francophone institutions, mainly in Belgium.

The most outstanding paper is the concluding one by Danielle de Lame, which sets out a feminist framework and then elegantly places each of the other articles within it, occasionally pushing a point made by a fellow contributor to an insightful new level. For example, Gertrude Tshilombo Bombo opens the book with the question, 'Existe-t-il un féminisme africain?' and then surveys terms coined by