

Love, Death, and History in West Africa

SEAN HANRETTA

My current research focuses on two distinct projects. The first explores the convergence of Muslim reformers and British colonial officials (and later Ghanaian officials) in conceptualizing a close link between modernization and the proper performance of rituals. Covering most of the twentieth century in both northern and southern Gold Coast/Ghana, the project traces the intersection of efforts by Muslim scholars, ritual and community leaders and younger, insurgent preachers to define the correct practice of weddings and funerals and to elaborate a distinction between what was properly Islamic and what was merely customary. Struggles between chiefs and religious leaders over the control of patronage affected how these rituals were inserted into administrative bureaucracies (such as through marriage certificates or the allocation of public cemeteries), making death and marriage subject to struggles for local power. Changing social and economic conditions connected mostly to urbanization, commoditization of labor and the migration of workers onto cocoa farms, all put strains on existing forms of ritual practice and created new opportunities for young men in particular to challenge accepted authorities. Popular support thus developed for the new ways of thinking about rituals being circulated and enabled by reformists and administrators. After independence the Ghanaian government moved away from close involvement in Muslim affairs, preferring instead to mobilize clients through community leaders. This further allowed reformist preachers and new social actors to reshape rituals even as the expanding rhetoric of African underdevelopment and need for modernization placed very specific values on cultural norms.



The second project looks at the social and political significance of African history teaching and research within West Africa itself from the 1960s to the present. It explores the changing role of West African university history departments in shaping the major concerns and empirical discoveries of the field, while also examining the impact of those departments on their surroundings. Key historians who became political figures (Adu Boahen, Gbagbo, Adame Ba Konaré) or major public intellectuals (Ajayi, Diop) are explored alongside the more diffuse influence of teaching and participation in civil society. The research is intended to test hypotheses about the links between the changing fates of West African universities and the trajectories of the field as a whole, and of the actual utility of a “usable past.” Using basic techniques of prosopography, I have traced the trends in publishing by historians based in West Africa (both

West African nationals and expatriates) from 1960 to the present in major English- and French-language journals, in landmark edited volumes and in key monographic series. This has provided the framework for a group of collective biographies of the less well-known members of the research networks. The next phase of the project involves collecting local histories—oral and published—from the history departments at the targeted universities.

Sean Hanretta is assistant professor of history and an affiliate with the Center for African Studies.