

African mediators, the Asante and British colonial rule

Introduction

Tom McCaskie

In the articles that appear in this issue I offer detailed biographical discussions of the lives of Kwame Tua and Kwasi Apea Nuama. They were full brothers and were born into an independent Asante where they might have expected to pass their lives as servants of the Asantehene in one specialist capacity or another. Like most Africans of their generation, however, their lives were disrupted by the brute fact of colonial overrule, and each followed a markedly different path in coming to terms with the changes – adventitious as well as purposeful – that were wrought by foreign overlordship. As will be seen, the two brothers were singular individuals who crafted very different lives under the impress of British imperial rule upon their Asante inheritance. Hence, in reviewing and assessing their personal trajectories, I endeavour to give a close-grained account of life courses adjusted and negotiated by agency to the opportunities as well as the limitations of their circumstances.

At one level, both Asante brothers described here might be seen as mediators – literally and culturally ‘translators’ between the old and the new. Figures of this kind are now receiving due scholarly attention from Africanists (Hunt 1999; 2016; Lawrance *et al.* 2006; Kolapo and Akurang Parry 2007; Newell 2013; Ochonu 2014; M’Bayo 2016) as research moves on beyond the simple and simplistic dualism of collaboration and resistance (Cooper 1994). I am obliged to the suggestive insights afforded by this scholarship, and notably to its basic finding that such persons exercised their greatest influence as colonial regimes were settling in and embedding themselves before the 1920s. Mature colonialism allowed far fewer interstices in which such persons might insert themselves and operate, as both our subjects here discovered in their distinct ways.

The touchstone for many new studies is *L’Étrange destin de Wangrin ou les roueries d’un interprète africain* (Bâ 1973; 2000; Garane 2013), a masterly piece of cultural reportage in the guise of a novel by the great Malian Fulani intellectual Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901–91). In this book, the protagonist Wangrin is eventually brought low by a life lived between two alien worlds. The meat of the text, however, is an account of Wangrin’s *roueries* – his devious negotiations, or ‘ducking and diving’ – as he performs a vertiginous but ultimately doomed balancing act in pursuit of a workable selfhood and status that will afford him due recognition from both the European rulers and the African ruled. Simply put, both of the articles that follow are attempts to illuminate the detailed complexities

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of motive, aim and behaviour (including *roueries*) in two Asante individuals at a very particular historical conjuncture. I have argued for close and intensive biographical work of this sort before (McCaskie 2000: 70–9). The present articles, then, might be termed micro-historical studies, but like all such studies their intention is to supply *multum in parvo* by juxtaposing and teasing out actor and milieu in all of their multifarious interactions (McCaskie 2015: xi–xxiii).

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