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RELIGION AND ART IN ASHANTI

Capt. R. S. Rattray: *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, with chapters by G. T. Bennett, Vernon Blake, L. H. Dudley Buxton, R. R. Marett, C. G. Seligman, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927, pp. xviii + 414. Price 30s. net.

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On the first page Capt. Rattray states that it is his aim to help us to form definite conclusions as to the true nature of this wonderful people, the Ashanti. This he certainly has achieved and we can be confident that when his third volume, dealing with Law, appears, we shall have as complete a picture of them as we possess of any African people and a better one than of most. Those who are acquainted with the first volume, "Ashanti," are, of course, aware that no one but an assembly of exceptionally learned Ashanti dignitaries can have the necessary qualification to deal critically with Capt. Rattray's work; the ordinary mortal can only thank the author for leaving him after reading it so much less ignorant than he was before the fruits of his researches enlightened him.

Every page betrays the author's exceptional qualifications for field work, his unparalleled knowledge of the country, its people and their language, and his sympathetic nature which invited those precious confidences by which his readers profit. We have to deal with a record of that kind of work which is at present most urgently needed in the African field: the intensive study of a single people by a man well fitted and equipped for the task, ready to devote several years to its achievement. Potential workers of this stamp are not lacking in the Colonial Service; it remains for those at home who may profit by their labours to use all their influence to give them an opportunity of showing their mettle.

Capt. Rattray approached his problem with the mind of an impartial judge and theorising does not appeal to him. He prefers to give, frequently verbatim, the opinions of his native friends, leaving it to his readers to draw their own conclusions. One wishes sometimes he would not efface himself to such an extent. Thus when he deals with the spiritual parts of the quick and the dead we should be grateful for a little more guidance from such a high authority. The spirit of the ancestors are *samanfo*, yet a *saman* has nothing whatever to do with any kind of soul and no living person has a *saman*. Whence does this spirit come and what is its nature? One is naturally tempted to search for enlightenment among other West African people- even if they be Bantu.

Now, in Kongo, the human shape is something quite distinct from the body as represented by flesh, blood and bones; it is considered an impalpable attribute. Is it not possible that the shape should be freed to become a *saman* after death? The fact that *saman* is also a ghost makes this hypothesis the more probable. Or, is the *saman* the equivalent of the posthumous *chingvhule* of the Ba-ila? If I remember correctly, Capt. Rattray does not deal with the shadow in his work. On p. 154 Capt. Rattray points out that there is no clear line of demarcation in his informants' mind between *okra*, soul, and *sunsum*, what one might call the double. The man of little learning feels inclined to draw again on the Kongo and to attribute to the Ashanti souls the same distinction as he has found in that country: the equivalent of *okra* is there the spiritual soul, the soul that wills and thinks, while the *sunsum* is a sensory soul whose function is to perceive through the senses.

In both places the double can leave the body in life time, as during sleep, and can be a witch, while the *okra* has even after death to be separated from the blood, in Ashanti by invocation ("so-and-so, I separate your soul [*okra*] from us [i.e., from the *abusua*]") in Kongo by the more materialistic process of desiccation. In both cases the destination of the sensory soul after death could not be ascertained.

After a valiant attack on the use of the word fetish which has been such a nuisance to all of us, Capt. Rattray suggests that the word *suman* should be substituted for its narrower meaning; an excellent way out of the muddle. But in "shanti," p. 86, we are told that gods may almost merge into the class of *suman* and Prof. Seligman has kindly called my attention to the statement in this book (p. 11) that a *suman* may be promoted to the rank of *abosom*. It is important to know whether such cases are sufficiently rare to be disregarded. In connec-

tion with the word *suman* the author points out the antagonism which exists between these inferior spirits and the gods and draws the conclusion that, had the Ashanti been left to themselves, "fetishism" would have completely disappeared before the higher religion.

I should like to call his attention to an entirely different phenomenon observed among the Western Bantu: there, too, we have this antagonism, perhaps even more pronounced, between the cult of the ancestors and "fetishism," but we have historical proof that the latter is of recent introduction (15th or 16th cent.) and has constantly gained ground to the detriment of the loftier creed. This question seems worthy of further investigation.

It is impossible to enumerate the important features of this book; we find them on every page. However, it must be mentioned that Captain Rattray gives us for the first time a full account of an Ashanti king's funeral, and throws a new light on the ideas inspiring the orgies of blood which form part of it. The Ashanti point of view may be deplorable, but the author certainly makes it plausible. The Ashanti have a different conception of life and death from ours; what for us is a plunge into the unknown, a much feared break, represents to them simply an unimportant landmark in their existence, a passage from one sphere to another.

It matters little when it takes place and there may be a considerable advantage in advancing its date. The men who have been great in the land under a king prefer to die with him and pass into the "other place" with all their dignities, than to live a few years more and enter the spirit world degraded by his successor. Another ceremony about which we shall have to change our minds is that of the notorious Yam customs, which appear now as annual purification ceremonies of the nation.

Nor will Capt. Rattray allow us any longer to attribute the various tabus inflicted by the native doctor to trickery, a kind of insurance against failure; we must admit the doctor's good faith when he advises his clients to abstain from certain actions which are "hateful" to the plant which is to cure them. He introduces us for the first time to funeral customs for animals and plants.

But his book carries us far beyond the frontiers of Ashanti. Every chapter is suggestive and the revealed Ashanti beliefs and customs frequently serve to explain matters which have puzzled us in other parts of Africa. His account of the apprenticeship of a witchdoctor

shows how the Kimpasi society of Kongo must have originated, a tempting subject to write about if space permitted. The elders in Kongo could not explain the nature of the Bisimbi; Capt. Rattray's fairies and sprites do. It would be easy to give examples by the score.

One point in the book requires some elucidation.

"A witch is powerless to use her or his enchantment over any one outside the witches' clan."

Witches' is obviously a misprint for *witch's*. But, if so, this gives rise to the problem: how can a slave be a witch as he or she has no clan, *abusua*?

Religion and Art in Ashanti is a classic; it shows us what can be done and how it ought to be done. If one states that the Clarendon Press has made the form of the book worthy of its contents one bestows the highest possible praise.