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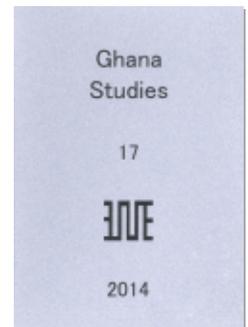
Hindu Gods in West Africa: Ghanaian Devotees of Shiva and Krishna by Albert Kafui Wuaku (review)

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Albert Kafui Wuaku. *Hindu Gods in West Africa: Ghanaian Devotees of Shiva and Krishna*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 324 pages + illustrations. ISBN: 978-90-0424-488-7

Hindu Gods in West Africa explores the origins and practices of two Hindu communities in Ghana, the Hindu Monastery of Africa and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the latter commonly known as the Hare Krishnas). The author places special emphasis on how these communities' Ghanaian followers interpret Hinduism. Based largely on interviews with devotees, Albert Kafui Wuaku's book is the first major work on this intriguing subject. Though there are larger Hindu populations in other African countries, especially South Africa and Kenya, Hinduism has developed in Ghana without a significant Indian presence.

Besides their association with different branches of Hinduism, Shaivism (Hindu Monastery) and Vaishnavism (Hare Krishnas), the two groups are distinct in significant ways. The Hare Krishnas are the local branch of the well-known worldwide proselytizing movement founded in 1966 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The center for their activities in Ghana is the Sri Radha Govinda Temple in the town of Medie outside Accra, but there are numerous small groups of devotees around the country as reflected in the community's multi-ethnic composition. In contrast, Akans make up most of the membership of the Hindu Monastery, an indigenous temple located in the Odorkor neighborhood of Accra. It was formed in the 1970s by Kwesi Esel, a traditional priest who had traveled to India seeking "healing powers." Known as the "first and only African guru" to his followers, who believe he can perform miracles, Esel still leads the Hindu Monastery.

Wuaku interviewed "a large number of members of the two temples" (35) and participated in meetings, ceremonies, and crusades for this field-based ethnography. It certainly should appeal to a wide audience, not least scholars of religious studies, Hinduism, and Ghana. Wuaku seems to write for each one of these

constituencies as he painstakingly discusses the varied components of this study, such as Hindu cosmology and Akan culture, assuming these subjects may be unfamiliar to readers. While this approach may be commendable, and necessary for parts of the narrative, it also can be tedious, for instance when Wuaku makes elementary points like “In Ghana, a hometown is the village or town where a people and their ancestors come from” (222). In his defense, there is much ground to cover in explaining how and why Ghanaians embrace a South Asian religion. Wuaku tackles many topics, including: perceptions of India and Hinduism in Ghana; beliefs and practices associated with Ghanaian traditional religions; how some aspects of traditional religions have been integrated into (what I will term) “Ghanaian Hinduism”; the relatively recent emergence and popularity of Pentecostal Christianity; and Ghanaian Hinduism’s usage of some of the rhetoric and activities of these new churches. Wuaku thus provides the cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts to interpret the development of the two Ghanaian Hindu groups.

The localized, syncretic, and seemingly contradictory nature of Ghanaian Hinduism is revealed in seven chapters. Wuaku argues that the appeal of Hinduism, for many devotees, may partly be explained by Ghanaian notions about India as a place of healing, magic, and power. These originated with Ghanaian soldiers returning from World War II-era service in India and were reinforced in the following decades by the widespread popularity of Indian films. Some devotees, particularly those in the Hindu Monastery, focus on the commonalities between Hinduism and Ghanaian traditional religions, especially in opposition to “alien” faiths like Christianity. The author maintains that embracing Hinduism is viewed by these followers as a way to protect and maintain aspects of traditional culture. Wuaku also discusses the misconceptions about Hinduism amongst Ghanaian Christians, including the charge it is “satanic,” yet shows how followers of

both religions often share preoccupations like acquiring “power” against evil. Moreover, Ghanaian Hindus utilize some of the outreach tactics of the Charismatic Christians like the aforementioned crusades. Overall, the author emphasizes that the relatively recent embrace of new religions in Ghana, whether Hinduism or Pentecostalism, must be understood as coping strategies by Ghanaians facing economic hardship in an increasingly globalized world.

Though Wuaku privileges the voices of the Ghanaian Hindus he interviewed, it is disappointing he does not consistently cite their names nor offer more detailed information about the interviews, such as dates and locations. The extended quotations Wuaku abundantly incorporates into his analysis lack any citations and he fails to provide a list of interviewees in the bibliography or as an appendix. Conversely, the author obsessively mentions the languages in which interviews were conducted, often employing quite specific descriptions including “English with a heavy Ewe accent,” “Togolese Ewe,” and “Pidgin English.” Yet, his use of terminology is oftentimes inaccurate: “Krobo” is identified as “an ethnic dialect” (276) rather than more precisely a dialect of the Dangme language and Ga and Ewe are called “local dialects” (35) instead of languages.

While this book would have benefited from more careful editing, *Hindu Gods in West Africa* is an original, important, and engaging contribution to the literature on religion in Ghana.

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