The Northern Factor in Ghana History

Benjamin Talton

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A friend told me of meeting a lorry driver in a restaurant in Bolgatanga, capital of Ghana’s Upper East Region. He had arrived from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and was heading south. When she asked of his final destination, he responded, “Ghana!” The unwitting irony and humor in the man’s response speaks directly to popular perceptions of “the north,” among Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians alike, as somehow not really Ghana. Northern Ghana—presently Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions—has been widely regarded as shaped by a history and culture distinct from its neighbors in the regions to the south.

In Ivor Wilks’s publications, from the early 1960s through the mid-1990s, his goal to provide the ingredients for a cohesive history of Ghana, extending back to the fifteenth century, is evident. In reconstructing these histories he pioneered “the north’s” historical significance, particularly with regard to Asante. Similar to other historians and anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s, Wilks was concerned with political structures. He viewed Asante’s relations with its neighbors from the perspective of Kumase. Asante was, for him, in any case, the nucleus of modern Ghana. The cultural, commercial, and spirituals goods from the north sparked Asante’s growth in the sixteenth century, and, following the European interruption of the first half of the twentieth century, the development of modern Ghana. For our purposes, the north refers both to Ghana’s northern region and, at times simultaneously, but often distinctly, all land and peoples north of “Greater Asante” extending into the Sahel. Wilks’s claims, simplified here, but, hopefully accurately rendered, did not come without controversy and dissent.

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2. A. Norman Klein offered a direct challenge to many of Wilks’s conclusions, particularly his, so-called, big bang theory of Asante’s origins, in “Slavery and Akan Origins?”
Wilks revealed the northern factor in Ghana history as hidden in full view. In a lecture at Legon in 1995, despite J.B. Danquah’s insistence to the contrary, Wilks plainly described no tangible link between modern Ghana and Old Ghana. Mali, rather, ignited the historical processes culminating in the birth of the Ghanaian republic. Yet Mali, as a country name, of course, was already taken; and Wagadu (Old Ghana) did not carry Ghana and Mali’s historical heft. Songhai would not do, as well, for there was a modern Songhai people and language. As a Mande power, Ghana, the popular name for Wagadu, satisfied Gold Coasters’ desire for links to West Africa’s golden age. Wilks continuously reiterated that such connections were readily available in Ghanaian history and culture.

His argument in this regard is the thrust of the first chapter in The Northern Factor in Ashanti History, which he reiterated in subsequent essays and lectures. It centers on Dyula merchants from Mali in the fourteenth and fifteen centuries, whose trade in goods for gold from Akan expanded mining and commerce, and the wealth from which Asante emerged and grew. Ground zero, so to speak, was Begho (Nsoko), directly south of the Black Volta’s southern bend. The town was the southern terminus of the trade route to Jenné for Dyula merchants, when Twi and Guan-speakers carried...
out dumb-barter with Dyula. Wilks wrote, “The extension to the coast of the Niger-Begho route was a matter of some consequence for the history of Ghana,” Wilks wrote, “for the event was closely connected with, among other things, the rise of the new kingdom of Ashanti” and, therefore, modern Ghana.

The Malian factor also made agricultural production possible, as wealth from the gold trade provided the means for labor to clear the forests. Economic influences spilled into politics and culture, for Dyula founded Gonja, to Asante’s north, under Nybanya in the early seventeenth century, and spread Islam to Dagbon. Earlier, Dyula migration and settlement established Wa and shaped the development of Mamprugu. In Asante, the Mande made an indelible cultural, linguistic, and political imprint. Asante’s growth, as Wilks writes, was “the beginnings of a history that bonds people together rather than separates them.” The point is clear: modern Ghana is a product of Asante, not of the British, and Asante’s growth was propelled by economic and cultural influences from the north.

Although Wilks did not write a history of modern Ghana, his work illuminates the many pieces, northern, Muslim, Malian, Akan, etc. that became modern Ghana. Clearly, he did not deal with all of the country’s ethnic, cultural and historical parts. What it meant to be Ghanaian, at the time, and what Ghana was, remained an open question. Yet, as the anecdote of my friend and the south-bound truck driver in Bolga highlights, perceptions of Ghana that marginalize the north persist, despite the efforts of scholars such as Wilks. Nonetheless, subsequent generations of scholars of Ghana might build upon the methods that Wilks honed and the broad perspective of history that he encouraged.

8. Wilks, One Nation, 24.