

Review: The Colonial Encounter and Changes in Meaning among the Anlo-Ewe

Reviewed Work(s): Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana by Sandra E. Greene

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Source: *The Journal of African History*, 2004, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2004), pp. 336-338

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4100484>

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local views of appropriate forms of rule as by any bureaucratic or financial calculus.

An intriguing essay by Deborah Durham reinforces Crais's point that mimetic appropriations of state forms have transformed local cultures, enhanced resistance and continue to frame possibilities for indigenous identities, through her study of 'passports and persons' amongst Herero peoples across Botswana, South Africa and Namibia. Perhaps here the subtlety of the argument disappoints a little, surprisingly since Durham's is one of the more creative essays in the collection. In the act of inventing passports alongside forms of proto-military organization (the Otjieserandu), in the wake of the failed Herero War against the Germans in 1904, there seems to have been a suggestion that control of the right to move around was itself something to be (symbolically) appropriated. And although the opening example has a subtext of this 'spatial' resistance, in this account the passport remains a metaphoric component of a wider cultural resistance/appropriation. Did the hardening of borders and growing limitations on movement across the subcontinent more directly inspire the appropriation of this rather obscure element of a bureaucratic state?

The essays inhabit in such a creative way the complex and contested forms of rule and resistance in the region that it seems unreasonable to take issue with them (although a couple are a little weak and not so novel in their approach). But I wonder if there does not remain a useful distinction between states – their forms of organization, strategic capacities and spatial extent – and forms of indigenous resistance – with all the huge obstacles they face in trying to sustain wider association and spread, and durability over time. Also, there is a sense in which the essays suggest that the 'rational' western state was subverted in Africa. How might these narratives transform accounts of the state elsewhere? Finally, while these essays draw on some exciting literature in anthropology and history from across the world, they seem to indicate a certain distancing from regional scholarship. It would be a great shame if, post-liberation, Southern African historiography lost the close links which have sustained an exile and foreign scholarship in creative synchrony with locally based scholars. There is a danger that the popular American scholarship drawn on as inspiration in this book replaces attention to debates from the region. There is much to learn from other contexts. But there is also much to learn on these topics from scholars working in South Africa, now and in the past, and they receive rather scant attention here.

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THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER AND CHANGES IN MEANING AMONG THE ANLO-EWE

DOI: 10.1017/S002185370435944X

Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana. By SANDRA E. GREENE. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. Pp. xix + 200. No price given (ISBN 0-253-34073-X); \$19.95; £15.50, paperback (ISBN 0-253-21517-X).

KEY WORDS: Ghana, colonial, culture, memory, religion.

This is a very ambitious and rather contestable work. Sandra Greene attempts to reconstruct what the Anlo people of southeastern Ghana 'had both remembered

and forgotten about the meanings associated with specific places [Notsie and Anloga], with specific spaces [burial sites and water bodies] and with the [human] body' (p. x). She uses material collected on field trips to Anlo between 1977 and 1996, records and publications of the Norddeutsche (Bremen) Mission, British colonial documents and a large number of secondary sources.

The author is at pains to establish that she is not interested in a run of the mill expose of the impact of European cultural contact. Again, she is keen to respond to D. W. Cohen's challenge to historians (as paraphrased by Greene) 'to do more than chart the history of Africa in terms of its responses to large world processes', by exploring 'those intimate areas of social life within the African communities that shifted and changed in response to local forces, changes which then intersected with the large structural forces to create social histories particular to the communities studied' (p. 132).

Greene explores how colonialism and Christianity affected not only the economic and political life of institutions and individuals, and relations within and between groups, but also the terms by which the Anlo understood and interacted with their physical and human environment, in which certain material sites were considered to have special meanings. The sites examined include the ocean, permanent bodies of potable water, burial grounds, religious centres and the male and female human body. The book discusses how these sites were conceptualized by the Anlo in precolonial times, as both material and spiritual, and how and under what circumstances these conceptualizations were challenged first by some people in Anlo itself, and later by German pietists and British colonial officers. The author focuses on the landscape (as well as the human body), defined as those places and spaces that are visible to the eye and are the focus of collective visual activity. She discusses how meanings of place and space have shifted over time: how far changes in the religious meanings attributed to the sites mark both a shift in understandings of the landscape and in how the Anlo understood themselves and their material and spiritual environment.

The book adds to a growing number of scholarly works on the Ewe, of whom the Anlo are part. It provides evidence of erudition, extensive reading and familiarity with a wide range of sources. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach to the writing of history, using insights from anthropology, religious studies and geography about the importance of understanding place and space through the meaning the communities attribute to them.

The author is at pains to sustain a number of pet hypotheses. There is a tendency occasionally to over-stretch the interpretation of the evidence or source cited and to ignore evidence or material that would dispute or bring into question the claims being advanced. A number of scholars of Ewe history and culture would be startled by a claim that the missionaries contributed to changing the memory of Mawu from one of a number of deities to the presently widely held one of a Supreme Being, with the attributes associated with the Christian God. Another surprising claim is that it was German missionaries who 'took it upon themselves to define the various Ewe-speaking peoples in the region as a linguistic community' (p. 19): the 'missionaries selected Notsie as the site from which all Ewes would be encouraged to believe they originated' (p. 20).

One is reminded of Jan Vansina's admonition to historians of Africa some twenty years ago that 'our present perceptions of Africa and our understanding of its past are conditioned by the epistemological categories well established by 1900, and in large part derived from the observations of administrators, missionaries and various travelers. Their perceptions were translated directly, uncritically, into their conclusions, and once published, these have often been accepted as fact, as if

they were similar to incontrovertible experimental observations on the structure of crystals'.¹

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THE WRITTEN WORD AND THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER

DOI: 10.1017/S0021853704369446

Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The Encounter between the LoDagaa and 'the World on Paper'. By SEAN HAWKINS. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Pp. xv + 468. £55 (ISBN 0-8020-4872-2).

KEY WORDS: Ghana, anthropology, colonial, literacy, oral culture.

The need to understand colonialism as both political project and 'cultural encounter' between colonial administrators and African 'subjects', with profound effects on the negotiation of identities and construction of legitimacy in the postcolonial world, has been an important insight of recent studies on colonial rule. Hawkins's book on Lawra District, northwestern Ghana, contributes to this research by focusing on the 'power of writing' and its role in establishing colonial domination. It argues that the texts and categories produced by external observers (colonial administrators, European anthropologists) and, more recently, by the local literate elite, not only 'distorted' and 'misrepresented' indigenous social practices, but 'assaulted' the flexibility, ambiguity and negotiability that were typical of oral cultures (and, as Hawkins implies, are missing in literate societies). The 'world on paper', as Hawkins puts it, violated the autonomy of the 'world of experience' by imposing a 'mimetic tyranny' (p. 328) on the latter's representations of their experiences towards the 'external world'. Only if the LoDagaa – as he insists on calling the Dagara and Dagaba of northwestern Ghana, perpetuating an ethnic name coined by Jack Goody – reorient their self-representations 'inwards', can their 'sovereignty be regained, identities ... liberated, authority legitimated, and fluidity and negotiability preserved in social practices' (p. 325).

Hawkins's study is based on painstaking analysis of archival sources in Accra, Tamale and Lawra (though not of those in London's Public Record Office), together with texts by local intellectuals. Endnotes on archival and ethnographic minutiae comprise nearly one quarter of the voluminous book. It offers illuminating insights on many aspects of colonial rule and the mission of the White Fathers in Lawra District. The chapters on the local courts provide a particularly fascinating account of how colonial officers (later magistrates), local chiefs and male litigants fashioned debatable (and subsequently contested) notions of 'marriage' out of a complex of local practices that established conjugal unions. The interest that administrators and the Catholic clergy took in delineating unambiguous rules concerning 'marriage' and child custody converged with attempts of LoDagaa elders and wealthy men to control women and rival males more rigidly. Equally convincing is Hawkins's discussion of the role that missionary medicine played in the mass 'conversion' of LoDagaa in the early 1930s, and his critique of the local

¹ Jan Vansina, 'Knowledge and perceptions of the African past', in Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies – What History for Which Africa?* (Beverly Hills, 1986), 29.