

[Talton on Lentz, 'Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana'](#)

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Carola Lentz. *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. xii + 346 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2401-0.

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Commissioned by Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia

Local Approaches to the Study of Identity and Power in Africa

This book provides one of the most significant contributions in recent years to understanding the intersection of notions of belonging and conceptions of power common among Africans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through the experiences of the residents of Nandom in northwest Ghana, Lentz explicates the myriad and dynamic factors that shaped local ideas about power and belonging and the equally dynamic forces that led individuals and groups to embrace them. The book's actor-oriented perspective of African history and politics provides a fuller understanding of African experiences in colonial and postcolonial Africa than the more common top-down approaches. Lentz explains that she has taken as her point of departure "the 'non-self-evident nature' of the formation of power and domination in the colonial state" (p. 9). African responses to colonial regimes had profound consequences for the concrete workings of colonial rule. Rather than singular identities, individuals and groups constructed, embraced, and utilized ethnicities, which changed over time.

The book is divided into two major parts. The first part discusses political organization in the northwest on the eve of European colonization. Lentz describes the administrative structures and chiefdoms that the British established, as well as the strategies that British officials employed to legitimate these new institutions and incorporate Africans into them. Indirect rule laid the foundation for the political primacy of chieftaincy and the social significance of tribal loyalty within local society. This period, from roughly 1930 to 1951, produced a Western-educated leadership that appropriated the colonial lexicon of power and belonging, but redefined them in ways that served their interests. The book's second part explores the various ways in which chiefs, Western-educated elites, and labor migrants revised colonial ethnic and political boundaries after World War II.

Research for this book involved over fifteen years of sifting through colonial and postcolonial archival documents, formal and informal group discussions, oral interviews, and local observations, among other methods. Pulling these different techniques together in a truly multidisciplinary manner enabled Lentz to capture the seemingly minor details within events and processes that ultimately proved to be critical to achieve a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the social and political transformations of local society in Nandom. In addition, devoting such a long period to a single society inevitably fostered close relationships between Lentz and her informants in Ghana and, as she describes, with Ghanaian immigrants from Nandom in Germany. This intimacy enabled her to capture highly informative discussions among these groups about the categories they employ to identify who

they are, and the characteristics that define these categories at different times and in different contexts.

Most studies of identity politics in Africa, particularly ethnicity, focus on colonial officials, missionaries, and Western-educated political elites. One of the signal strengths of this book is that Lentz not only presents the significance of these groups in shaping notions of power and belonging, but also skillfully brings the non-elite actors to the fore by highlighting the control they maintained over the construction and assertion of ethnic and regional affiliations. As she argues, "ethnicity" is a term that belongs "not only to the theoretical repertoire of social scientists but also to the vocabulary of chiefs, politicians, local intellectuals, labor migrants and social movements" (p. 3).

Lentz uses this multiplicity of perspectives to effectively demonstrate how the various regions, groups, sources of power, and aesthetics with which Africans identified themselves and around which they forged relationships reveal the weakness of the state, particularly the colonial state, in matters of identity politics. Africans successfully maintained autonomous domains throughout the colonial period and managed to influence the colonial discourse on power. African informants who collaborated with colonial officials deliberately and thoughtfully attempted to shape administrative practice, often with amazing success. By presenting the African colonial experience in this way, Lentz contributes to the effort among a small group of scholars to rethink Africans' position within the colonial power structure and the meaning of power and African agency in the colonial context.

Her discussion of the different ways in which chieftaincy and labor migration served as catalysts for locally oriented change is particularly illuminating. Both were firmly established by British colonial rule, yet Africans molded them into tools for gaining access to resources, social status, and for marking group identity, in ways that the British did not anticipate. She highlights this local agency without understating the significance of European influence. She acknowledges, for example, that chieftaincy was "one of the most momentous innovations" that came out of colonial rule, for the ways in which it, "gradually re-ordered, or at least overlaid, older local concepts of belonging and authority" (p. 2). Yet part of her goal is to demonstrate that local societies did not blindly accept these changes. Rather, in ways similar to precolonial contests over power, chieftaincy was an institution that Africans continually challenged. Some contested its legitimacy, while they competed to occupy its office. Similarly, individual chiefs used a variety of means to gain greater control over economic and political resources. As the British administration transformed and expanded chieftaincy in Nandom, chiefs legitimated their claims to authority by reinterpreting oral traditions and appropriating the British "tribal" discourse. Therefore, just as British officials selectively employed historical memory as a tool to define chiefly power and mark tribal boundaries, it was also a tool that Africans used to legitimate political claims and control over resources.

Similarly, Lentz shows that migrant workers from Nandom were a major force behind the spread of Western aesthetics in northwest Ghana. Although Africans have always traveled to new areas out of economic necessity, the patterns and motivations behind labor migration changed under British colonial rule. During this time, decisive changes came to the nature of labor migration and the ways in which it intersected with ethnic categories. Ethnic affiliations became critical for organizing away from home. Ethnicity was often critical to the "idioms of solidarity" that young migrants fashioned. While this process evolved, beginning in the early 1920s, migrants who traveled to the southern Gold Coast (present-day southern Ghana) to work in the mines, railway construction, and on cocoa

plantations used some of the money they earned to satisfy their changing ideas of what was considered beautiful and what constituted consumer goods. In cities and mining towns they were introduced to a new world filled with a sense of autonomy and goods not accessible in their villages. They were, as Lentz describes, “‘civilizing’ themselves, and, by sharing their experiences and views, they were also civilizing their brothers back home” (p. 138). Western consumer goods became a means to demonstrate migrants’ social and economic independence and served as proof of having traveled away from their home region. Through narratives and an analysis of these experiences Lentz helps to make clear that ethnicity was constructed both from “above” and “below.” These examples of locally driven social and political change reflect the overall weakness of the colonial state as an agent of change.

Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana is essential reading for understanding power and belonging in African society. Lentz exposes the pitfalls of neglecting the local in scholarship on the encounter between Europeans and Africans and among Africans themselves. She counteracts scholars’ tendency to place undue emphasis on the British capacity to shape the regional landscape. This is an important book that will not only influence the ways in which scholars discuss and examine power and categories of belonging in African societies, but approaches to field work as well.

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