
This is a detailed and comprehensive historical study of local politics in north-west Ghana during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on Nandom. The negotiation of changing, contested, and polysemic constructions of belonging is an important part of this history. Nandom today has several meanings: it is a more or less clearly bounded territory encompassing settlements and inhabitants subject to the Nandom Naa (traditional ruler), but it is also a point of reference for social networks and a sense of belonging that transcends these territorial boundaries. This monograph discusses these meanings of Nandom, the historical circumstances that led to their rise, and the practices associated with each, as well as the extent to which ethnic boundaries, kinship ties, and political alliances cut across boundaries of chiefdoms and districts. The title of the book, and the theoretical reflections in the introduction and in the final chapter, appear to locate the work in the tradition of studies debating ethnogenesis and the limits of invention of ethnicity. The book is, however, more subtle and more comprehensive in its tracing of diverse forms of belonging, the roles of individual actors, and changing modes of interaction with the colonial and postcolonial state. It thus contributes to recent attempts to explore the different ways in which African local communities have responded to, interacted with, and helped shape the modern state.

The book is organized chronologically. There are ten chapters. The first deals with north-west Ghana in the nineteenth century, and introduces the main concepts of belonging, the ‘house’ and the ‘earth shrine’, as well as a flexible network of alliances and enmities between independent villages, individual ‘strongmen’, and Muslim warlords. Subsequent chapters then discuss how chieftaincy was introduced and ethnicity was created during the colonial period. Here we see a complex interaction between British colonial administrations, the attempts by various colonial officials to discover relevant knowledge, and the ways in which African interpreters, chiefs, and others shaped or manipulated this knowledge. The debates are described in great detail, making clear just how subtle and complex the production of history was, and how this was the result of multiple and shifting alliances between individual colonial administrators and members of the local African elite. In this context it is quite striking how much attention is given to debates and discussions among colonial officials about the area. This may be a reflection of the available source material, which means that these debates have been better preserved than similar ones amongst African actors. It may also be that recent contributions to the historiography, which emphasize African agency in creating belonging, have been underestimating the importance of categories defined by colonizers. The book then traces how administrative changes required re-groupings in the negotiations in which local African leaders played important roles.

Subsequent chapters discuss the various ways in which labour migration resulted in changing ethnic labels and increased awareness of ethnicity; the impact of the mission of the White Fathers; and the conflicts and re-negotiations induced by decolonization and local government reform. During this period we see a reworking of controversial issues in ways similar to when the British colonial government attempted administrative changes in the late 1920s and 1930s. A later chapter then describes how these issues were picked up again when party politics provided a new vehicle for local conflict. Throughout the book we see how, again and again, definitions of group membership are reworked, interweaving multiple colonial and
pre-colonial models of belonging, but each time returning to familiar emblems, affinities, and histories.

The author indicates that the current book emerged out of an initial manuscript written between 1995 and 1996. Between that time and the publication of this book, the author has made a number of other important contributions which have helped to shape the current mainstream understanding of ethnicity and the local dynamics of colonial and post-colonial administrations. These insights are brought together in this book, though it does not focus too much on the wider theoretical relevance: it is a very thorough and convincing case study. It is of great importance to scholars interested in northern Ghana. The book is clearly written, though the reader sometimes gets distracted by the level of detail that is provided. One point of criticism for the publisher: the copy-editing could have been better – when there is so much nuance and detail to be grasped, then the occasional ungrammatical sentence really does trip the reader up.

University of Liverpool

DMITRI VAN DEN BERSSELAAR

doi:10.1093/afraf/adp047
Advance Access Publication 15 August 2009


Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over several years, Anita Fábos studies the Muslim Arab Sudanese community of Cairo – not as a homogeneous subset of Cairo’s residents but as part of the fabric of Cairene life in its various forms. As she states, ‘The connections that bind Sudanese and Egyptians together are both ideological and geopolitical, but they are also cultural and personal’ (p. 27). Indeed, after several years of living in Cairo myself, I, like many Egyptians, failed to see Sudanese residents of Cairo as distinct from their Egyptian counterparts. It is precisely this common perception that Fábos problematizes in her research. In addition to writing a thoroughly engaging ethnography of Sudanese residents in Cairo, Fábos makes an important contribution to our understanding of the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender in the construction of diaspora identities.

The author provides a useful overview of the history of commercial, political, and kinship ties that Muslim Arab Sudanese share with Egyptians as residents of the Nile Valley. For much of the nineteenth century and half of the twentieth century (until 1956), northern Sudan was part of Egypt. The process of decolonization led to independent nation-state building that established a more rigid demarcation of Sudanese and Egyptian citizens. Yet the Arab nationalism of Gamal Abdel-Nasser also emphasized the unity of the two countries – albeit a rather unequal relationship where Egypt clearly saw itself as the superior partner. In this context, there were several official initiatives for cooperation in various domains, and even a short-lived federation, all of which facilitated interactions, including intermarriage, between Egyptian and Sudanese and resulted in relative ease of settlement of Sudanese in Egypt.

Fábos demonstrates how the idea of ‘brotherhood’ between Egyptians and Sudanese continues until this day, yet, since the National Islamic Front came to power in 1986, relations between the two countries have deteriorated gradually, with implications for the status of Sudanese in Egypt. As Fábos notes, ‘The last privilege that Sudanese citizens in Egypt had, permanent residency, was cancelled in July 1995, [as] the Egyptian response to alleged Sudanese government complicity...