name but a few, the Alvordian drive to modernize land use and agriculture in the reserves in the 1930–40s; the emergence of ‘customary policies’ that attempted to draw ‘traditional leaders’ into government administration after the demise of the controversial Native Land Husbandry Act in the 1960s; rural nationalism, guerrilla warfare and the struggle for independence; and the different waves of resettlement of commercial farm land and re-organization of communal areas and local government after independence—actually took place, and the contests that they evoked in specific locales. But few writers have attempted the ambitious, even audacious, endeavour of doing this kind of research in two such contrasting parts of the country, or accomplished the task with such evident success (avoiding the pitfalls both of generalization and of over-burdening the reader with detail). The result is a book that will be essential reading for a wide variety of audiences, from students of African history to researchers, activists and others focusing on the specifics of Zimbabwe’s troubled politics of land—and hopefully including those commentators, biographers and others who felt compelled to exploit the opportunities provided by ‘the crisis’ to deliver their own verdict on the post-colonial politics that has played out in such complex ways across the country.

Given the accomplished manner in which Alexander’s book delivers an analysis that simultaneously explores the broader issues at stake, yet is acutely sensitive to the detailed empirical situations of specific events in her particular districts of study, it is perhaps not surprising that this book can only deal in a brief final chapter with Zimbabwe’s recent land reform programme and the accompanying ‘authoritarian’, and often violent, turn of renewed but narrowed nationalist politics. Nevertheless she uses this limited space well to demonstrate the relevance of the earlier chapters, bringing Zimbabwe’s long and complex histories of land and state-making to the very foreground of the current situation. In so doing, she both provides the tools with which the dramatically changeable and highly unsettled politics of land and authority in post-2000 Zimbabwe can begin to be understood by researchers, and also challenges those tussling with this formidable task by raising the stakes involved in the writing of Zimbabwean history and politics. This is going to remain an important contribution to the literature for a long time to come.

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This book is a PhD thesis reworked for publication. Its main focus is on what the author calls ‘the politics of nationalism in Ghana’. The book contains three main foci of interest: theories of nationalism; nationalism in Ghana; and the outcome of the 2000 and 2004 general elections. They do not fit together that well. Each is fine in its own right, but the overall thrust and import of the book is rather unclear. Yet the book is well written, except for the introduction (Chapter 1)—in which both style and content are problematic—and the brief conclusion (Chapter 10), which is whimsical and insecurely related to the bulk of the material featured in the foregoing chapters.

Chapter 2 is a long (over 40 pages), competently executed account of the emergence and development of the concept of ‘nationalism’. It is the kind of
chapter almost invariably found at the start of a PhD thesis: an overview or survey of the relevant academic literature on the theme of the thesis.

Chapter 3 engages with the debate about the extent to which present-day Ghana is related to the historical entity of Ghana. It is often noted that the two do not bear much geographic resemblance to each other, although Amoah argues that the links between them are closer than is generally realized: he contends that most present-day Ghanaians could trace their ancestry to the ancient entity of Ghana. Chapter 4 includes the author’s critique of the claim that present-day Ghana is clearly differentiated from the ancient state of the same name.

The fifth chapter makes a conceptual leap to discuss why Ghanaians voted as they did in the 2000 and 2004 elections. In this context, Amoah discusses the notion of ‘the rationalization of ethnonationalism’, which for him is the main, indeed the only, way of explaining how Ghanaians voted in 2000 and 2004. He posits that ‘the political choices of voters would be skewed towards the interests of their ethnonational identity group or a preferred other closely related, for any reason, in what can be described as the rationalization of ethnonationalism’ (p. 6). He proceeds to examine this hypothesis in Chapters 6–9. His claims are based on a 501-person survey of the industrial city of Tema, close to the capital, Accra. He then asserts that what he finds in relation to Tema— that voters are indeed often concerned with the ethnicity of the candidate they vote for—is in fact true for Ghana as a whole, even though no other surveys were conducted in the country as evidence. His discussion of the elections of 2000 and 2004 is focused simply on his hypothesis, and he proceeds to explain the victory of the NPP and President Kufuor in those terms. Crucially, however, no alternative reasons for voters voting in the way they did are presented.

Overall, this is an interesting but quirky book that mixes solid academic theory with some rather whimsical analysis of less substance. It will be of interest to those interested in Ghana’s recent political trajectory and democratization, while readers whose interests extend to the political question of nationalism in the country will also find material with which to engage.

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The question of national identity in Africa has recently become acute again. On the one hand, the civil conflicts of the past two decades have put in question the very definition of the nation state. On the other, the widespread display of xenophobia and the violence unleashed against ‘strangers’ have enflamed notions of citizenship. What a ‘nation’, a ‘state’ or a ‘citizen’ are today in Africa is not as clear-cut as political theories of development once confidently predicted. Furthermore, one of the unintended consequences of the democratization process that started in the late eighties has been the renewed instrumentalization of political tribalism (to use Lonsdale’s expression) – as the current events in Kenya, the latest in a long line of such ethnic strife, make abundantly clear.