

acculturation, education, conversion, commercialization, and professional and personal ambition in civilian and military life” on the continent (96). Birmingham then weaves into this point a plea for politicians, educators, students, businesspeople, and “the international white Land Rover brigades” to get more than a cosmetic view of Angola’s—and indeed Africa’s—people. His book provides an excellent place to start.

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**Steven Pierce. *Farmers and the State in Colonial Kano: Land Tenure and the Legal Imagination*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xii + 272 pages. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth.

*Farmers and State in Colonial Kano* makes for frustrating reading for a number of reasons. It has no clear time frame of reference, no identifiable defensible thesis, and little focus. The author’s tendency to hunt for obscure phraseology, write long incoherent sentences, quote extensively from other works, and engage in endless, often unnecessary debates with specialists in the field only adds to the reader’s confusion and frustration. He or she is left in the dark as to when and how the information on which this book is based has been gathered, evaluated, or cross-checked against other sources for authenticity and reliability. On several occasions this reviewer found himself forced to interrupt reading this work out of despair and dejection, something he has never done with any other book.

To make sure that I am not judging *Farmers and the State in Colonial Kano* too harshly, I went back and reread the author’s introduction. I was looking for clues as to the main purpose of the book. I was unable to find any clear statement about the author’s goals or methodology. Rather than trying to summarize the often conflicting statements in the introduction, I will let the author speak for himself, at the risk of subjecting my readers to the same frustrations I suffered:

The text is therefore devoted to exploring the implication of a state based upon misconception and mis-construal. (1)

Ultimately, therefore, the book focuses upon two topics: first, the phenomena affected by attempts to regulate land, which were only very imperfectly reflected or controlled by idioms of land rights; and second, the theoretical models of government initiatives for controlling land matters. (2)

Ultimately, this book takes as its central concern forms of regiments that were recognizable as formally legal and at the same time seen as contributing to a governmental regularity. . . . This book takes as a central concern the apparent seductiveness of “land tenure” as a stand-in for relations

of government, for its use simultaneously as a *symbol* of commoner-state relations, and as an *explanation* for state control. (2, 4; italics in the original)

This book thus combines an ethnologic approach to landholding in Ungogo with a critical history of land as both an object of government and an object of knowledge. (5)

This book is about government in the sense of governance, and to a large extent the governmental processes that affected land tenure inhered in institutions that we would call (a part of) the state. (6)

The aim of this book is to trace problems of contemporary analytic categories to their historic roots and to examine their political consequences. . . . I am equally concerned with what it means for a state to emerge with its basic institutions centered on a reductive, peculiar land tenure paradigm. . . . I take as my point of departure the empirical problem of the contradictory base of northern Nigeria land tenure. Ultimately, my purpose is to suggest something about the nature of law. . . . Being wrong may not stop law from being legal—perhaps its contradictory quality is a necessary condition—and my concern is to trace how this inappositeness becomes a feature of the legal system and so is itself incorporated as a strategy of governance. . . . The problematic of this book requires an examination of two distinct objects of inquiry: the lives of rural smallholders—how they organized agricultural production, how they patterned their rights to land, and how they understood these most complex social processes—and the government initiatives that so systematically misunderstood this complex local knowledge. (7, 12, 15)

Pierce admits, though, that the goal of his project may be unattainable: “This book is pursuing an elusive object—the historical importance of the nonexistence of ‘land tenure’ as it has been conventionally understood” (17). This is why the book “practices a sort of ethnohistorical hermeneutics, in which ethnographic and historical data are interpreted for the insight they provide into the long-term trajectory of a larger cultural field” (17). And so on.

After considering all the inconsistent remarks and convoluted statements about the aims of the book, we can concede for the purpose of argument that the author does have a thesis, namely that the whole edifice of the British Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria was constructed on faulty assumptions about land tenure, or what the author repeatedly labels “colonial fetishism.” Calling the British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria “fetishistic” is one thing; proving its reality is quite another. To begin with, it is methodologically inappropriate for the author of *Farmers and the State in Colonial Kano* to take land tenure in the small village of Ungogo or, in this case, the lack of it, as representative of the rest of the Kano Emirate, let alone Northern Nigeria, or, for that matter, Nigeria as a

whole. Again, it is hard to agree with the author that the entire colonial administrative structure in Northern Nigeria was conceived and founded on "land tenure" alone, whether or not such land tenure was correctly or incorrectly understood by those concerned. It is equally inconceivable that the elaborate system of Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria, which was constructed and run by able office holders with long administrative experience who were supported by capable native rulers and advisors and lasted for the better part of half a century, was nothing but fetishism, founded on a hoax. But since this negative verdict is passed by a young researcher who spent only a few months in a small village near Kano, frustrated, as he himself admits (17), by his informants' inability to explain past practices of land tenure, one must not hasten to write the obituary of Indirect Rule in Nigeria, or doubt the ability of the British and native officeholders to understand and interpret correctly Hausa farming culture and practice.

I do understand that graduate students must gain their terminal degrees and get published as quickly as possible. But I cannot understand why the prestigious Indiana University Press, the icon of serious and outstanding scholarship in African studies, has decided to endorse and put its enormous reputation behind this substandard piece of work.

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