

Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch. *The Politics of Chieftaincy: Authority and Property in Colonial Ghana, 1920-1950*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014. 256 pp. ISBN: 9781580464949. \$85.00.

The Politics of Chieftaincy by Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch provides a comprehensive and discerning overview of the contestations and negotiations between Ga chiefs, lineages, individuals, and the colonial state, all of whom fought over the increasingly valuable land in colonial Accra, Ghana. Such an examination provides readers insight into the authority of the chiefs and other holders of power in a concise yet multi-layered study detailing the rapidly shifting political and economic situation of the colonial heyday in Ghana. This book represents an important re-examination of colonial power and chieftaincy as the Ga responded to the interconnected issues of colonialism, urbanization, and economic change.

In highlighting the negotiated nature of land claims, the author works to situate the history of the Ga people in terms of chiefly power, lineages, gender, and generation, and, through a thorough reading of the colonial archive, she emphasizes the fluid nature of land ownership. While the author focuses on the period between 1920 and 1950, she thankfully extends her examination much earlier and much later, providing important context for those unfamiliar with the particular history and rich traditions of precolonial Ghana and the Ga people.

The first two chapters demonstrate the problems the colonial state encountered in attempting to understand the complex land-usage customs found among the Ga people. At nearly every juncture, the colonial state misunderstood, oversimplified, or enacted alien land-usage laws, resulting in popular protests and newspaper outbursts against colonial rule. Furthermore, the author highlights how the fluid nature of land claims in Ga society contradicts persistent European beliefs that Africans did not sell land; tellingly, such an examination demonstrates the static nature of the colonial project compared to the constantly changing nature of Ga customs. These chapters provide an insight into the problems associated with the production of colonial knowledge and highlight the overall weakness of the colonial state, even in urban areas.

The disputes surrounding the sale of land are the central theme of the subsequent chapters. Here, Sackeyfio-Lenoch highlights the importance of court cases described by prominent Africanist scholars, such as Richard Roberts, by focusing on important judicial battles over who can or cannot legally sell land. Property in and around Accra increased greatly in value through the colonial period due to immigration, commercialization (including the production and sale of lumber and cocoa), and various colonial projects. Here, the legal disputes between claimants, and often against the colonial state, allow African subjects and local chiefs to highlight their agency and competing agendas. The ability of chiefs, who could claim traditional legitimacy and promise communal benefits, to exploit land sales for their own gain is a core argument that further questions the overall strength of the colonial state—even in capital cities, where its presence was the strongest. However, the author successfully shows the contested nature of chiefly power, especially those recently empowered by the state, and, in doing so, highlights an inherent tension in colonial rule.

Through the examination of land disputes, the book brings together several strands of recent historiographical developments. While having precolonial origins, a market-oriented system expanded during colonial rule, with land being increasingly commodified and owners actively watching the increasing value of land. Additionally, the colonial state redefined the position of chiefs and justified such change in the name of tradition. Such action afforded the fortunate

beneficiaries enhanced authority over land claims and greater authority than in the past. The author not only highlights the constant changes that occurred as a result of the colonial period, in part due to broader connections to the outside world but also delves into Accra as a “privileged place of colonization” and into the fluid nature of Ga traditions. Thus, the book demonstrates the difficulty of inventing traditions and, despite several attempts, enacting unpopular colonial laws.

As the title implies, Sackeyfio-Lenoch also works to reassess the importance and power of chiefs during this period. She demonstrates their agency and lends nuance to previous interpretations of chiefs that range from being decentralized despots, to use Mahmood Mamdani’s phrase, to being dismissed as colonial agents. Here, the author engages with the expanding historiography of chieftaincy and provides detailed examples highlighting the importance of chiefs as independent historical actors out to improve their own economic situation. Several case studies throughout the book underscore avaricious and land-hungry chiefs who were equally problematic for the colonial state and their subjects. However, despite their privileges, chiefs’ power remained tenuous, as many were deposed either by the colonial state or their African subjects. In this examination, the author expands upon the notion set forth in *Intermediaries, Clerks, and Interpreters*, which shows the competing agendas of African functionaries by adding the occupation of chiefs.¹ The author highlights their necessity in the operation of the colonial state but also accounts for individual economic, political, or social motivations. As the land cases demonstrate, Ga chiefs needed to deal with the constraints and misunderstandings of the colonial state, and also within a web of often competing individuals, families, and religious authorities.

There are a few problems with this otherwise well-researched and convincingly argued monograph. Sackeyfio-Lenoch leaves readers wanting even more lurid details—specifically, what did increased wealth mean in terms of lifestyle changes? What happened to the proceeds from land sales—were they invested in children’s education or quickly spent on more trivial items? Is this reflective of larger trends in Accra, and how does this compare to other African cities that are now receiving increased scholarly attention? Additionally, the largely thematic chapters slightly muddle the general chronology and obscure the changing nature of the colonial project, especially the changes brought by the Second World War and the post-war period. Finally, while the book firmly links power held at the local and state levels, more connections to shifting imperial and global paradigms should be provided and contextualized. Links to larger imperial and global issues are especially evident at the start of the book, but the major imperial changes regarding the philosophy of rule need further development to account for larger social and political changes.

Overall, the book is a pleasure to read, with clear, engaging prose, and is highly suitable for readers ranging from first-time students of African history (although such students might get lost in the complex debates over land tenure and chieftaincy itself) to experts in colonial Ghanaian history. Sackeyfio-Lenoch’s focus on the use of property to provide insight into the role and power of chiefs gives historians a better and more nuanced understanding of the colonial state and its relationship to its African subjects. The insights of the author provide a

¹ Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

variety of historiographical themes that allow students and scholars to realize the importance of contestations over land and how they impacted authority in colonial Ghana.

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David Harris. *Sierra Leone: A Political History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 232 pp. ISBN: 9780199361762. \$30.00.

In *Sierra Leone: A Political History*, the historian David Harris asks whether nations should be defined by catastrophe. He has a good reason for this question. Catastrophe seems to be how people think of Sierra Leone if they think of the country at all. In the film *Blood Diamond* (2003), the former British colony is presented as a plaything for the regional powers and multinational companies vying for control of Sierra Leone's diamond mines. Harris offers an alternative perspective. He considers the difficulties of Sierra Leone to be "what are effectively the birth pangs of a country" (2).

Harris offers two analytical approaches. The first advances a straightforward narrative of Sierra Leonean history between the establishment of the colony of Freetown by former North American slaves in 1787 and the present. The author examines long-term structural changes in public life, concentrating extensively upon the development of a client state. The second approach asks a series of theoretical questions about continuity and change that consider a "complex state-society relationship which has evolved and yet maintained many of its key features" (4). The author blends these approaches to make a critical intervention. This identifies a key continuity between colonial and post-colonial Sierra Leone: the use of patronage by political authorities in Freetown to gather support from rural or military elites.

The book can be divided into three distinct sections. The first three chapters show how patronage became embedded in Sierra Leonean public life under the British Empire. This was a consequence of policies of indirect rule through chiefly rulers, which led to the waning of the authority of the urban *Krios*, descendants of the freed North American slaves who founded Freetown in 1787. This process became more acute following the discovery of diamonds in the Sierra Leonean interior in 1931. Investments in infrastructure that would connect diamonds to export markets sparked a struggle between rural traditionalists and urban modernists for control of this process. By the eve of independence in 1961, Harris suggests that elder dominance had split the country into two patronage camps: those who supported the chiefs, and those who sought votes from groups marginalized by traditional leaders.

The client state provided short-term stability, but it also undermined colonial and post-colonial economic development projects and faltering efforts at democratization. The fourth and fifth chapters describe how this process unfolded. By the 1970s, Prime Minister Siaka Stevens had established a one-party state that used control over diamond mining and exports to win military support, and access to land and labour to gain backing from rural elites. This led to economic uncertainty and political repression, making civil war more likely. The final chapters of the book deal with the civil war that begun in 1991 and its aftermath. Chapters six and seven trace the outbreak of fighting and then examine the interventions by Economic Community of Western Africa States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) troops and British armed forces that brought the conflict to a close in 2000. Chapters eight and nine