

BOOK REVIEWS

HISTORY

David Newbury. *The Land beyond the Mists: Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009. xvi + 444 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$59.95. Cloth. \$32.95. Paper.

Dramatic events such as the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, followed by the devastation of the lands around Lake Kivu in the Rwandan-Congolese border area, put the region of the Great Lakes for a short time at the center of global media coverage. However, most commentators suffered from historical short-sightedness and completely ignored the deeper historical dimensions of the horrific tragedies in Central Africa. David Newbury's essay collection not only offers an excellent introduction to the history of that region; it also impressively expounds the possibilities of the historiography of precolonial Africa, a field by now rather marginalized in history-writing about the continent. And while collections of this kind are often incoherent and arbitrary, and represent rather dubious historiographical monuments, the volume at hand offers a wide array of masterfully treated themes tied together by a single analytical thread: the perspective of the "middle ground."

In this way, Newbury attempts to decenter "our vision of social dynamics in a region where in the past outsiders' focus on the 'center' has been so important" (3). He does not deny the relevance of state actors or royal centers on which the majority of European travelers, missionaries, colonial officials, and scholars have placed the emphasis. But he is less interested in state histories and central policies than in personal experiences, multiple agency, and local initiatives. For most people, he argues, state norms were not a major concern. He shows convincingly that in the Kivu Rift Valley, social networks and political loyalties were never clearly distinct—that "clear-cut political distinctions in this area were fleeting phenomena" (4).

Another important concept at the heart of Newbury's analytic approach is that of the "frontier zone." According to him, the Kivu Rift Valley was an area of poorly defined contours and quickly changing perceptions. Such frontier zones, he underlines, were much more than zones of separation and/or interaction. They could also play an important role as "zones of creativity" where regional social innovations were produced by marginalized citizens who lived beneath the radar of an elite- and state-focused historiography.

The twelve chapters of the book, complemented by a substantial introduction, appeared between 1974 and 2001, some of them in journals now extinct. They are presented in four interrelated sections. The two essays of part 1, "Historiography," offer an insightful overview of the production of historical scholarship relevant to the book; the first examines the intellectual foundations of earlier representations of history in the region, and the second looks at the first generation of historians to work in the Kivu Rift area in the two decades after decolonization. Part 2, "The Lake Kivu Arena," consists of five essays that focus mainly on Ijwi Island, a densely populated island about twenty-five miles long located in Lake Kivu, with a royal dynasty dating from the early nineteenth century. These essays, which draw extensively on oral sources and local perspectives, share a focus on societies almost entirely neglected in earlier writings. Taken together, they represent a turn away from older approaches linked with colonial historiography.

The four essays of the third section, "The Rwanda Arena," reevaluate established wisdom in Rwandan historiography and suggest new perspectives on material exchange, social identities, and political culture. As Newbury observes, Rwandan historical studies, though highly developed, most often "take . . . the form of foxed, known, and certain elements, closely linked to central court histories" (15). His own work challenges this focus by paying attention to developments outside the realm of the central court. Some of the articles assembled here have influenced thinking about concepts and categories in African history that extend far beyond the case of Rwanda. For instance, the essay titled "The Clans of Rwanda," initially published in 1980, makes the powerful and deeply resonating argument that such apparently static kinship groupings as clans were always changing and reacting to wider political contexts. The concluding essay in part 4, "Perceiving History through the Mists," takes stock of the insights of the previous essays in order to provide a new understanding of precolonial history east of the Rift Valley. It explores regional influences and local loyalties, underlines the importance of ecological factors and local identities, and focuses on the interactions of royal power and rural power. The classic themes of a large part of history-writing on this region—the royal court, kings, and ethnicity—are not dismissed, but put into perspective.

The Land beyond the Mists is far more than a "must read" for everyone interested in the history of Central Africa. It powerfully demonstrates the achievements of Africanist historiography over the last four decades and represents historical work at its best: empirically based, methodologically sophisticated, locally informed, broadly inclusive.

Andreas Eckert
Humboldt University
Berlin, Germany
andreas.eckert@asa.hu-berlin.de