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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

CAROLA LENTZ, *Land, Mobility, and Belonging in West Africa*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press (hb $85 – 978 0 253 00953 1; pb $30 – 978 0 253 00957 9). 2013, xii + 331 pp.

This book is the fruit of research carried out over more than twenty years in the northwest corner of Ghana and in neighbouring areas of Burkina Faso. Working with informants on both sides of every issue in a series of detailed cases, the author traces the history of the progressive occupation of land by small groups of farmers, from the nineteenth century to the present. The principal groups involved are the relatively settled Sisala and the much more aggressively mobile Dagara coming in from the north, together with other ethnicities such as the Mossi, who have been driven south in recent times by land shortages. Lentz's principal focus is on earth shrines and the 'priests' who controlled them; these have generally been treated by anthropologists and district commissioners as 'religious' figures, but here are shown to be central to local politics. Supposedly, shrines to the earth have been in place 'forever', but in fact they demonstrate surprising mobility; senior shrines can generate junior shrines in the form of stones that can be carried from place to place and used to authenticate new land claims.

The book traces three parallel trajectories. The first is a history of land occupation from the nineteenth century onwards, reconstructed as far as possible from competing and incompatible traditions, and later from records. The second outlines changing political and regulatory environments, from precolonial times, through French and British colonial rule and successive national regimes, with their divergent concepts of 'land' and 'ownership'. Lastly, the author shows how the identity and scale of the groups involved shifted from families to patriclans, 'tribes', ethnicities and 'nationalities', each new identity serving to invoke new narrative genres in support of land claims and to muster new configurations of allies. None of these units are given; all are defined in the course of segmentary political relations. Individuals hold rights to land as members of specific communities, but the definition of such groups is unstable and negotiable, as is their membership. Since the 1960s, the strategic community has become that of 'citizens'; people whose ancestors have farmed for generations on both sides of what is now a national border may find themselves described, on both of those sides, as foreign intruders, as 'strangers' with no rights.

In the nineteenth century, Dagara in search of land moved south into territory sparsely occupied by Sisala, whose own ideology celebrated the permanent community of co-residents rather than mobility. By some combination of accommodation and violence, immigrants established themselves as clients of Sisala earth shrines or acquired shrines of their own. Under colonial rule, when violence was ruled out, new sovereign (allodial) titles could no longer be created; officials assumed that 'tribes' had been in place since time immemorial, and that their internal and external relations were governed by tradition, but in practice old titles could be challenged, transferred or renegotiated by advancing convincing narratives about long-ago events. Three of the principal narrative types describe as 'first-comers' the hunters who 'discovered' the land, the farmers who effectively occupied it, or the warriors who conquered it. All such narratives are advanced as 'true', but since they all describe a relationship between man and nature (in the form of earth shrines), rather than a social contract between people, they do not invoke a human institution that could legitimately arbitrate their competing claims. Pure politics fills the administrative vacuum (p. 248).

The book bridges a number of artificial dichotomies and substitutes a picture of flux and uncertainty for the illusion of a stable past and immutable rights entertained by many of the actors in the story, both African and European. The French differed from the British in their understanding of Africans and how they should be ruled, but on each side there were deep internal differences. British officials argued about whether the central Dagara institution was that of 'chief' or 'earth priest', basing both models on their own preconceptions rather than on a clear practical understanding of either. Modern Dagara ideas about themselves have been influenced by the experience of many as migrant labourers in the south; Lentz begins the book with a conversation with such an individual in the mining town of Obuasi, where the Dagara are always 'strangers'. She finds that the invasive Dagara were organized into specialized groups of hunters, warriors and farmers. In contrast to her general emphasis on agency and change, she adheres to an older anthropological tradition in treating patrilineal and matrilineal organization as a given; she says that patriclans 'enable' Dagara mobility by maintaining relationships over time and space (p. 38), but never investigates the internal organization or affairs of descent groups, or their possible origin.

Joint winner of the 2014 Herskovits Award, this is a major contribution to the ethnography of the north of Ghana, an area seriously underserved in this regard – as in so many others – and to the ongoing national debate in Ghana about land ownership and the fiercely contested claims of autochthons and strangers.

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RICHARD VOKES, *Ghosts of Kanungu: fertility, secrecy and exchange in the Great Lakes of East Africa*. Woodbridge and Kampala: James Currey and Fountain Publishers (hb £25 – 978 1 84701 009 4; pb £18.99 – 9 781 84701 072 8). 2009, 256 pp.

Richard Vokes has written a remarkable book. It is not one he could have foreseen writing when he began his doctoral fieldwork in Uganda in March 2000. But a week after he arrived in Kampala, while watching a football match one evening, a newsflash announced a mass suicide in the heart of his proposed research area of southwest Uganda. Vokes takes us on his journey as he put together a network of informants and documents over the eight-year period during which he endeavoured to make sense of this cataclysmic event.

The heart of his study is a new religious movement, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. It was at its headquarters in Kanungu that a fire broke out in a locked building, leaving at least 400 people dead. A calendar in an adjoining building contained what appeared to be a brief, but revealing, suicide note. On 16 March someone had written 'world's end', and on 17 March, the day of the fire, 'bye'. A large body of evidence of the sect's millenarian beliefs was quickly gathered, but no sooner was Kanungu categorized by the world's media as another Jonestown than five further mass graves were found on MRTC properties, containing perhaps another 450 bodies. When post-mortems indicated that some of the deaths seemed to have been due to strangulation, stabbing or head trauma, police and media began to speculate whether this was in fact a case of mass murder, or a combination of murder and suicide. The media furore soon died down as little further evidence emerged, motives remained