

## REVIEWS

### A DECENTERED VISION OF PRECOLONIAL EAST CENTRAL AFRICA

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*The Land Beyond the Mists: Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda*. By DAVID NEWBURY. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi + 444. £62.50/\$69.95 hardback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1874-1); £29.50/\$32.95 paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1875-8).

KEY WORDS: Congo, Rwanda, historiography, identity, precolonial.

Historians of the Great Lakes region owe an enormous debt to David Newbury. For nearly four decades he has been at the forefront of scholarship on the region's past, and he has contributed perhaps more than any other scholar to the development of pre-twentieth-century historical knowledge about Ijwi island and the lands surrounding Lake Kivu, which today forms the boundary between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Consisting of an introduction and twelve previously published essays, *The Land Beyond the Mists* serves as a fitting testament to a distinguished career of scholarship devoted to unearthing overlooked perspectives into the deep past of an often neglected area of the continent.

The essays in *The Land Beyond the Mists* were originally published in a range of journals, many now discontinued, between 1974 and 2001. In bundling these articles into a single volume, Newbury divides the collection into four related thematic sections. Part 1, 'Historiography', contains two essays that together provide an overview of the production of historical scholarship in the areas east and west of Lake Kivu from the early colonial period to 1980. The five essays in Part 2, 'The Lake Kivu arena', take up some of the methodological challenges presented in Part 1 through a focus on Ijwi island, a geographical setting overlooked in the early scholarship. The four essays in Part 3, 'The Rwanda arena', concentrate on the precolonial history of Rwanda and the communities east of Lake Kivu, paying particular attention to developments that unfolded outside of the central court in Rwanda. Finally, the concluding essay in Part 4, 'Perceiving history through the mists', builds upon the insights developed in Part 3 to offer an original overview of the precolonial history of Burundi and Rwanda.

The essays in *The Land Beyond the Mists* address a remarkable array of themes: the development of historiographic traditions; the relationship between trade and political complexity; the use of oral sources in writing precolonial African history; the nature of sacred kingship; the interactions between central courts and peripheral areas; transformations in kinship ideologies; the politics of war and violence; and the incursion of colonial power. The variety of locales in which Newbury explores these themes renders the collection all the more impressive and demonstrates the author's extraordinary scholarly range. Yet perhaps the most striking, instructive aspect of these papers lies in the singular analytical thread that unites them. The essays collectively demonstrate Newbury's long-standing concern with 'decentering' our image of a region for which the writings of outsiders – travelers, missionaries, colonial officials – and the bulk of historical scholarship have consistently focused on state actors and royal centers. As Newbury eloquently states in his introduction to the collection, 'While state power was important in this area, most people, most of the time, were not preoccupied

with court politics or with state norms; their lives were lived outside of those familiar institutions that outsiders rely on to structure their knowledge' (p. 4).

Newbury's characterization of the Kivu Rift Valley as a 'frontier zone' separating the forest cultures of the Congo basin to the west and the highland states of the Great Lakes to the east informs his analytic approach in crucial ways. Rather than viewing frontier zones as marginal areas subject to incursions and influence from centers of political power, Newbury regards these often overlooked areas as 'zones of creativity' that fundamentally shaped the development of the region's well-known centralized states. Throughout the essays in *The Land Beyond the Mists*, he convincingly demonstrates that 'in historical terms regional social innovations were derived as often from the perimeter – from the marginalized, those thinking and acting outside of prescribed conventional norms – as from the center' (p. 7). Newbury arrived at this critical insight through meticulous research and painstaking analysis conducted over several decades; his body of work has guided subsequent historians of the Great Lakes region and will undoubtedly continue to do so for many years to come.

The relevance of *The Land Beyond the Mists*, however, stretches well beyond the Great Lakes region. The original publication of the essays in this collection coincided with the development of African history as a professional discipline in North America. When read together as a single body of work, they therefore offer the rare opportunity to trace the shifting intellectual concerns that have animated this development through the career of one of the discipline's most accomplished practitioners.

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## A USEFUL COLLECTION OF PORTUGUESE SOURCES

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*The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415–1670: A Documentary History*. Edited by MALYN NEWITT. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xviii + 246. £46.75 hardback (ISBN 978-0-521-76894-8); £19.99 paperback (ISBN 978-0-521-15914-2).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, precolonial, sources.

Without Portuguese sources we would know precious little about sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lacking an adequate knowledge of Portuguese, most historians of Africa have, like me, avoided this period wherever possible. In doing so, we have missed much that is of interest. To take just one example: in his *História das Guerras Angolanas*, written in the early 1680s, António de Oliveira Cadornega explained how the slaves exported from Angola were 'ransomed' from eaters of human flesh, adding: 'This is not only useful for commerce but still more for the service of God and the good of their souls. ... They are thus taken away from their heathen ways and are redeemed to live lives which serve God and are good for commerce' (p. 143). This must surely count as one of the most remarkable attempts ever made to justify the slave trade.

Newitt's anthology, which covers West Central as well as West Africa, constitutes a counterpart to his book 'East Africa' (2002) and was likewise initially intended for Ashgate's series 'Portuguese Encounters with the World in the Age of the Discoveries'. The emphasis is on 'encounters' and on Portuguese attempts to 'reconcile their experience with the myths and legends inherited from classical and