

Christian Lund. *Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiii + 200 pp. Maps. Tables. Notes. References. Index. \$80.00. Cloth.

Since the colonial period, the state in Africa has set itself up as the ultimate guarantor and arbiter of property rights. However, African governments generally have not commanded the necessary resources to enforce national land legislation in any comprehensive way. In many areas, the management of land issues is thus left largely in the hands of the local population. This does not mean, however, that state legislation and policies have no impact on land matters: state agents occasionally intervene in local tenure regimes, and state laws shape people's ideas on land, diversifying the ideological arsenal employed in local struggles over property rights. But indigenous institutions continue to play a central role in land disputes, while litigants also attempt to involve state institutions and authorities in asserting their contested claims to land.

Christian Lund's nuanced, well-argued study of local politics and conflicts over landed property in northeastern Ghana explores this resilience of "customary" land tenure and the longevity of legal pluralism that is typical for much of rural Africa. He shows that conflicts over land rights entail disputes not only about the contents of "custom," but also about which institutions should arbitrate between competing claims. Furthermore, he discusses how, on the one hand, current conflicts are shaped by past trajectories of rights, claims, negotiations, and dispute settlements, and how, on the other hand, people mobilize the past in order to defend their case.

Lund's book elucidates these themes by analyzing a series of micro-histories of conflicts about land rights and political authority in Ghana's Upper East region. The theme connecting most conflicts discussed (except the Bawku chieftaincy case, which does not quite fit into the book's narrative) is the devolution of northern Ghanaian lands to their "previous owners" through the 1979 Ghanaian constitution. However, the new legal framework never identified who precisely the "previous owners" were; it thus opened the door to competing land claims, as well as to disagreements over the legitimate authority in arbitrating such conflicting claims. Lund demonstrates the (re)negotiability of entitlements, and presents forceful examples of the longevity of claims that may well survive changes in legislation. In the recent controversy between Sara Berry (who emphasizes the flexibility and negotiability of property rights as well as the inconclusiveness of many land conflicts) and Pauline Peters, among others (who insists that researchers should pay more attention to processes of exclusion and rural class formation that limit negotiation and flexibility), Lund clearly aligns himself with Berry. However, Lund does pay attention to the factors of local, regional, and national power politics that position people unequally "in negotiating how land rights and property are to be defined" (11), and he

demonstrates the range of options that actors employ to defend or contest property claims.

This book successfully demonstrates how complex and unpredictable the consequences of new land legislation can be; as Lund puts it, “laws, regulations, and policies do not determine access and the use of resources as such, but erect a structure of opportunities for negotiation of these rights” (155). Political scientists and policymakers may miss a more systematic assessment of how the frequency and intensity of land conflicts have developed in the region, and how typical these northern Ghanaian conflict trajectories are for other African settings. Anthropologists and historians, by contrast, may contend that Lund’s strategy of illustrating theoretical arguments with an assemblage of microhistories that are not intimately interconnected means that the individual case histories cannot be presented in sufficient detail or depth. Moreover, the ritual and social aspects of land tenure are barely addressed. Given the importance to Lund’s argument of the 1979 constitutional revision, one might also have expected some discussion of how the new legislation was brought about, as well as why the conflicts triggered by the new legal opportunities emerged only ten or more years after the changes in the legal framework. However, these caveats make this study no less important and insightful. Scholars and policymakers can learn from Lund’s analysis that detailed local studies and a historical perspective are important if we want to critique conventional ideas about the prospects of replacing “customary” tenure regimes by, for instance, a system of individual private ownership titles.

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Abiodun Alao. *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007. Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora series. xix + 353 pp. Map. Figures. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$85.00. Cloth.

In 1989 I hitchhiked from Paris to South Africa. I was struck by the dominance of natural resources in local economies: date palms in Algeria, cattle in Niger, plantains in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), fish in Lake Tanganyika, copper in Zambia, tobacco in Zimbabwe, and gold in South Africa. Who had access to these resources and who did not—and why? What were the consequences of losing access? In accessible, readable prose this volume answers these questions, and its pan-African scope equals that of my hitchhiking journey.

Alao argues that the primary cause of conflicts involving natural resources (land, solid minerals, oil, and water) is a failure of governance