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Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa. By CHRISTIAN LUND. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 200. £45.00, hardback (ISBN 978-0-521-88654-3).

Christian Lund's book is an important contribution to the growing literature about two interrelated dimensions of governance and development in Africa that are alluded to in the title: local politics on the one hand, and the dynamics of property – more precisely property in land – on the other hand. The study of local politics and of dynamics of property necessarily refers to the larger framework of the modern state in Africa, understood both as an idea or abstraction, and as a set of concrete institutions and practices.

The book is based on research in the Upper East region of northern Ghana, but the conclusions drawn from the analysis of particular cases (or 'microhistories') can be generalized for much of Africa. Property rights in land are the (temporary) outcome of a complex process of appropriating, legitimating, and defending access to resources (arable land, trees, ponds etc.) located on a more or less precisely delineated territory. This process involves various actors and their agendas, both on the local and the national level, in a context of legal pluralism. The codification of individual or collective land claims in one form or the other does not preclude other people's attempts at securing rights to the very same resources, basing their claims on 'history' and 'tradition', and state legislation or state representatives are not the most powerful forces in the local arena. As the author points out, land rights conflicts are not simply about competing claims, but also about who has the right to settle these conflicts. This is where not only competing claims, but more general questions of social identity, political authority, and state formation come into play.

What makes the case of Ghana special was the watershed event of a constitutional change: 'When the 1979 Constitution declared that land held in trust by the government was henceforth to be handed back to its "original owners", earthpriests, families, and individuals saw an opportunity to claim land rights from government and chiefs and to contest a political order that had developed throughout the twentieth century' (2). This is the pivotal event that forms the backdrop for the claims, conflicts and court cases discussed by Lund. The constitutional change and the legal and political transformations that followed resulted in a number of unintended consequences such as for instance the re-emergence of earthpriests as actors in the local political arena after having been relegated to the background since the colonial period.

Apart from an Introduction and a Conclusion, the book has seven chapters, each of which offers case studies that show how local populations, earth priests, chiefs, entrepreneurs, lawyers, and politicians dealt with the legal space opened up by 'returning the land to its owners'. The empirical examples show the range of options available to the actors, among others the creation of a *fait accompli*, litigation, and violence. Anthropologists, historians, or political scientists with research experience on local politics and/or land rights in Africa will certainly see a lot of parallels with their own material and agree with the author's conclusion that 'when there are many institutions competing for the right to authorize claims to land, the result of an effort to unify and clarify the law (...) is to intensify competition among them and weaken their legitimacy' (177). Development experts may not be so satisfied. The author briefly refers to De Soto and dismisses his approach because it is based on the assumption that 'the state exists (...) as a set of congruent and hegemonic institutions capable of enforcing one

particular interpretation of property' (178). Policy-oriented readers are left wondering what conclusions to draw in terms of practical alternatives to the existing pluralistic and contradictory ways of legislating and enforcing land rights.

Some critical remarks: it would have been useful to have more maps that show locations mentioned in the case studies (for instance in chapter 3). Chapter 6 which had been published previously as a journal article is not well integrated into the general narrative of the book because land rights questions are not the dominant issue here. Some identical phrases turn up in different chapters (for instance chapter 2, p. 44, n. 37 and chapter 3, pp. 48-49). The application of the English plural form to African ethnic names is somewhat irritating, especially when two forms collide in one single sentence (p. 112: 'Mamprusis, Yorubas and Hausa, and Mossi'). The citations from literary works at the beginning of each chapter seem to do little more than demonstrate that the author is well-read. These are, however, minor points that do not diminish the fact that this is a concise, well-written book which will be of interest for a multi-disciplinary readership.

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