

Book Reviews

Amoah, Michael. 2007. RECONSTRUCTING THE NATION IN AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF NATIONALISM IN GHANA. London: Tauris Academic Studies. 248 pp. \$74.95.

The tension between nation-building and ethnic identities is an important issue in most African countries. This attempt to "reconstruct the nation" makes a promising start when Amoah states that after the achievement of independence, national feeling anticlimaxes and needs resurrection. Unfortunately, the book overall does not live up to the high expectations that its title may raise, mainly because it contains shaky assumptions about the Guan-origins of Ghanaians and suffers from self-contradictory conceptions of nationhood and ethnicity.

In the first part of the book, Amoah discusses notions of nation and ethnicity. He critically appreciates the works of authors like Anthony D. Smith and Walker Connor, who stand for rather primordialist conceptions. Surprisingly, though Amoah himself at times uses the phrase "the imagination of nations" and similar phrases, he fails sufficiently to review the body of constructivist literature on the imagination of communities, which has contributed much to the debate in recent years. From various definitions of nationhood, Amoah distills a checklist of what constitutes a nation, and concludes that Fanti and Ashanti were nations before the eighteenth century. He aims at denouncing the Eurocentric and modernist view that nations are exclusively Western European phenomena—which is by itself an interesting argument. In contrast, Benedict Anderson and others have underlined the constructiveness of nations: nations have no essence and thus no features that can be grasped in a checklist; they live in their members' imagination. From these analytical differences, a serious question arises: did Ashanti and Fanti imagine themselves as nations in the sense of the word? or did, as Carola Lentz (1995:317) has argued, other forms of partly overlapping, fluid, and flexible identities prevail in precolonial Africa?

It remains unclear how the nationhood of Ashanti and Fanti relates to the author's core hypothesis, developed in the next chapter, "The traditions of origin." Amoah holds the view that "almost the whole of modern Ghana [has] migrated from the area occupied by the Old Ghana empire" (p. 51), and that Guan ancestry has made "a significant contribution towards the modern Ghanaian identity" (p. 51). The only exception is the Ewe, whose ancestors are to be traced back to the territories of contemporary Benin. In support of his assumptions, he cites the anthropological studies published by Eva L.R. Meyerowitz in the 1950s; however, Meyerowitz's theses are highly contested among historians. In chapter 4, Amoah tries his best to defend Meyerowitz against criticism, but the impression remains that some counterarguments

carry more weight than he wants to admit. Vansina, for example, whose critique is dubbed “unfair” by Amoah (p. 93), makes an important point when he reproaches Meyerowitz for dealing uncritically with oral sources and taking myths of origin for reality. From this point of view, it could be that the narration of migration from the north is simply a dominant discourse, taken up by indigenous populations already living in the area.

Amoah’s project seems to be a reimagination of a somewhat “natural” solidarity of Ghanaians, very much in line with Smith’s assumption that modern nations are rooted in “core ethnies,” which are characterized by elements such as a myth of common descent, shared historical memories and a common culture, an association with a specific homeland and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986:22ff, see also Amoah, p. 16). Amoah adopts this view for the Ghanaian case: “The comparative stability of the Ghanaian state . . . can be attributed mainly to the presence of a demographically dominant ethnie [*sic*]” (p. 63), by which he means the Guan. Apart from the fact that ethnic homogeneity does not necessarily lead to stability (Somalia might serve as an example), this view itself could fuel ethnic tensions, because the Guan ancestry does not encompass the Ewe, who are thus coming to stand outside the majority of Ghanaians in a way that could be politically counterproductive to nation-building. The transcription of an interview in which Akan resentments against the Ewe are reproduced at length (pp. 235–236) is unhelpful in that context. Furthermore, whether or not most Ghanaians are of a Guan ancestry has been largely irrelevant to identity formation in contemporary Ghana. Amoah himself laments this on page 66: “the loyalty and electoral alliances which are supposed to have been between them [Ashanti and Brong Ahafo] due to their common ancestry seem not to have crystallised” (p. 66).

The rest of the book deals with ethnicity and voting patterns in modern Ghana, and does not take up the Guan hypothesis again. Amoah refers to Bayart’s “politics of the belly” and states that in a context of patron–client relations and unequal distribution of wealth, ethnic voting can become a rational form of group solidarity, especially for underprivileged groups. This is far from new, but Amoah’s conclusion is unique. In contrast to the mainstream literature, he reconciles ethnicity with nationalism: voters have no other choice than placing their ethnic group in state control and from this, “in being ethnonationalist, one becomes a patriot” (p. 118).

The above-mentioned Bayart-depicted ethnicity as shadow theater “cannot provide a basic reference point for postcolonial political areas, because it is itself constantly being formed and is largely mingled within the phenomenon of the state, for which it is supposed to provide the explanatory key” (1993:49), but Amoah is fast at hand with essentializing ethnic voting (chapter 8). He finds that most Ghanaians do indeed vote along ethnic lines, but his categories are highly problematic. For example, it is questionable whether “the Akan” constitute one single group with a homogeneous voting behavior, and the “Northerners” are actually no ethnic group, but a regional identity, resting upon marginalization (the north as one of the neglected

regions) and religion (the population of the three northern regions is mostly Muslim). Second, Amoah's findings are based on a simple dichotomy of tribalistic versus nontribalistic voting—which leaves all other factors aside. This is opposed to studies that have shown that ethnicity is only one factor among several that affect voting patterns, and it interacts with historical, sociostructural, and regional factors (see Boafo-Arthur 2006; Lindberg and Morrison 2005; Nugent 2007; Osei 2006; and others).

There is not enough space here to reopen the old debate between primordialist and constructivist understandings of identity, though the book would give enough ground to do so. Essentialists see ethnicity as a primordial identity, or even an expansion of kinship, and emphasize a common ancestry, history, language and culture; while constructivists view ethnicity as a flexible, strategic and instrumental social identity which is constructed under specific historical circumstances (see Lentz 1995:306). Despite Amoah's preference for essentialism, his book seems unintentionally to support the constructivist view. The plurality of identity categories offered in the book—Ashanti and Fanti as nations; a national stability based on an alleged Guan ancestry, which has yet not contributed much to contemporary identities; the Ewe, who stand outside this ancestry, but feel as citizens of Ghana in the same way as other Ghanains; "ethnic voting," which sweeps numerous groups in northern Ghana together under the category of the Northerner, which is not ethnic, but social and regional; the Akan category as a contradiction to Ashanti and Fanti as nations—rather proves that identity is flexible, fluid, and context-depending. Amoah did not take the opportunity to clarify his visions; his conclusion is only two pages long, and it does not bring the disparate parts and conceptions of the book together to make up a coherent argument.

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Matthias Basedau, Gero Erdmann, and Andreas Mehler, eds. 2007. *VOTES, MONEY AND VIOLENCE: POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA*. Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic African Institute. 301 pp. \$37.50.

Votes, Money and Violence is a richly and carefully researched inquiry into the roles of political parties, political-party systems, and electoral systems and their relationships to democracy in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Also included are two chapters exploring the roles and reasons for political violence in relationship to parties and elections in emerging democracies and one on the role of money. The volume is drawn from papers presented in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2003 at a meeting of the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies, a conference entitled “How People Elect Their Leaders: Parties, Party Systems and Election in Africa South of the Sahara.”

The volume’s authors are thorough, careful, and balanced throughout. With distinctive transparency, they work through many of the problems, pitfalls, and issues they confront in arriving at their conclusions. Indeed, they are so conscientious in this respect that many of the important conclusions and hypotheses their work suggests tend to be somewhat obscured, so careful are they to qualify their findings. In presenting their findings rather as a work in progress, the book will be more valuable to those with a strong interest but less background in the subjects than if the authors had presented their findings and supporting evidence in a more forthright manner.

Notwithstanding their thoroughness, balance, and analytical transparency, many significant themes emerge in the book—themes that deserve attention from other researchers, as these authors acknowledge.

First, while everyone grants the importance of parties to the viability of democracies, nascent or otherwise, the book’s editors are correct in stating that African political parties have received less attention than they deserve, beyond a general recognition that they are weaker and less programmatic than they need to be. The same is at least as true for party *systems*, including not numerous structural possibilities, but (equally I would add) whatever rules of the game parties work out—or fail to work out—to frame and regulate their electoral competition.

Second, the dispassionate examination of the roles, reasons, and functions of violence in electoral circumstances—as distinct from a focus on how to end or prevent it—is a useful contribution of two of the book’s chapters. The connections of violence to other dimensions of parties and party-system structures and functions will be a useful focus for further research.