

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Nugent. *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xx + 616 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$41.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781 107622500.

For more than a quarter century, Paul Nugent has been at the forefront of the study of African borderlands, through edited volumes such as *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities* (Pinter 1996, with A. I. Asiwaju) or monographs such as *Smugglers, Secessionists & Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands since 1914* (Ohio University Press 2002). In his latest work, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins*, Nugent has much broader goals: to show how the “geographical margins have been productive” (4) in creating states. He insists that, though the state is his point of entry, “The intention is not to privilege ‘the state’, but rather to put it firmly in its place – in every sense thereof” (6).

To demonstrate the “Centrality of the Margins,” Nugent uses a comparative approach that is uncommon among African historians. Building on his earlier work on the Trans-Volta (Ghana-Togo) border, he brings in a comparison with the westernmost part of the Senegambia (Senegal-Gambia) border. Connecting these two border regions, which share some similar attributes, allows Nugent to explore the local particularities that have shaped these regions and their component states. The focus in each of the four states discussed in this book is to demonstrate how state-making and border production are inherently linked.

Drawing on Jean-François Bayart’s call to, in Nugent’s words, “engage with the historicity of African social formations,” (13) the book works to reconstruct the history of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial states and societies of “the Agoime and their Ewe-speaking neighbours” (38) and the southwestern Senegal-Gambia border. This is accomplished over a series of fourteen chapters—including the conclusion—divided into four parts. The first part, “From Frontiers to Boundaries,” elucidates the precolonial history of both regions, ending with the making of colonial boundaries and their immediate aftermath, a process Nugent demonstrates was far from “arbitrary.” Part II explores colonial state-making through fiscal policy,

governance, border control, and land. Part III bridges the transition from colonial rule to the post-independence period, thinking through decolonization from a spatial perspective, and exploring border dynamics. Finally, Part IV, “States, Social Contracts, and Respacing from Below,” is designed “to underline the profound limits to state power” (395) through the exploration of border social and economic networks.

This comparative approach proves useful in exploring the specificities of local politics and state-making in these two regions. As Nugent points out, effort to shift colonial boundaries in Senegambia “was essentially top-down,” while “it was more bottom-up in the trans-Volta. But in either instance, the manner in which boundary issues were settled, stifled, or fudged was fundamental to the design of larger social contracts which, in turn, helped to fix governance patterns for decades to come” (317). It is in the explication of these social contracts, “hinged on the interchange between centers and the geographical margins,” (4) that Nugent’s work shines. The aims of this book are much greater than a history of two border regions: Nugent seeks to change our understanding of African state-making over the *longue durée*, and to influence political scientists and sociologists as much as historians. While Nugent is best known for his work on African borderlands, this work is meant for a far broader audience: scholars of Africa and the broader post-colonial world interested in the production and reproduction of colonial and postcolonial states, a story he argues is most accurately told from the perspective of border regions.

This book sets out to be a field-shaping work of scholarship, moving past local or national studies to offer us a continental perspective as seen from Ghana, Togo, Senegal, and Gambia. In that goal it succeeds, providing the reader a deep sense of both space and place while connecting these locations to larger national and international processes. Due to its length—over six hundred pages—and chronological breadth—spanning the precolonial, colonial, and post-independence periods—the source material is at times uneven, which is understandable, given the scope and size of the book. Additionally, the book often moves between chapters focused on national economic data and statistics to those focused on intricate social and community histories. Nugent takes on an impossible task in blending this variety of approaches, and yet produces a book that many scholars will be citing and drawing from in the decades to come.

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