

trajectory made, at least in part, out of their agency, but always pressured in ways opposed to their needs. “Only one thing is certain”, Pelz concludes, “Without a vision of a better world and the will to struggle for it, the people are lost” (p. 217).

This book gives us hope that such a vision is indeed possible, demonstrating as well that struggles to realize it are an undeniable component of a long and complex history. As the politics of the moment seem depressingly constrained, Peltz’s people’s history reminds us of an important historical reservoir of active struggle and humane commitment. This past posed alternatives to powerful social constituencies that have always stood quite apart from the people, however much they have been willing to speak on their behalf. Such a challenge is a provocation to resist that can be marshalled to refuse the limiting outcomes, registering in loss, that are currently being orchestrated by those for whom the people stand, always and unequivocally, as a threatening force to suppress and silence or deflect and defeat.

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KEESE, ALEXANDER. *Ethnicity and the Colonial State. Finding and Representing Group Identifications in a Coastal West African and Global Perspective (1850–1960)*. [Studies in Global Social History, vol. 22.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2016. x, 377 p. ill., maps, €135.00; \$175.00.

In the 1980s and 1990s, studies on ethnicity were popular among historians and political scientists working on Africa. Since then, the debate between the proponents and opponents of the “colonial invention of ethnicity” thesis has waned, but the significance of ethnicity as a locus of group formation and a political argument has not. Alexander Keese’s comparative study on ethnicity as a resource for political mobilization in three West African coastal areas represents a highly welcome contribution to an old debate, and it is rich in sources and theoretically ambitious. Drawing on the cases of the Wolof in Senegal (and Gambia), the Temne in Sierra Leone, and the Ewe along the Ghana-Togo border, Keese analyses how, since the mid-nineteenth century, European and African actors have used (or omitted) ethnic labels and arguments in their political actions. This study goes beyond the dichotomy between “primordialists” (who see ethnicity as a trans-historical, natural basis of group formation) and “constructivists” (who emphasize the situationally specific and politically informed “invention” of ethnic groups and the role of the colonial masters specifically) in that it convincingly analyses under what conditions and in what manifold ways African chiefs, educated elites, or merchants, as well as European missionaries and colonial administrators invoked ethnicity, or favoured other modes of group identification, such as membership of local, regional, or national political structures.

Keese regards ethnic groups as “self-declared communities whose spokesmen define them as groups with a common history and traditions, and who cling to this common identification independently from state structures and institutions” (p. 48). Although he points out that cultural markers for ethnic identifications are flexible and can vary both between and within

groups, he does not examine the intra-group struggles and negotiations shaping the cultural practices and norms that ultimately constitute ethnic difference. Instead, he focuses on the political instrumentalization of ethnicity in conflicts over land rights, taxation, and the definition of territories of rule and political hierarchies. His central argument is that ethnicity was and is used as the basis of group solidarity and for making political claims particularly in those places where pre-colonial state structures were weak or non-existent; in societies with functional pre-colonial states, in which the population enjoyed a certain degree of protection from outside (and inside) attacks, these state structures normally eclipsed the ethnic argument, “and, the recourse to ethnic mobilisation was not normally regarded as a necessary strategy” (p. 308). Interestingly, according to Keese, the observable differences in the intensity with which ethnicity was mobilized in colonial times were less the result of differences between Anglophone and Francophone traditions in colonial administration (which are fewer than one might suspect), but rather the outcome of local experiences with stateness. For Keese, this is an important insight to be generalized and applied to understanding the role of ethnicity in global history: “[I]f the structures of states and administrations provide a somewhat reliable set of rules, ‘ethnicity’ as a factor of group mobilisation is usually not needed” (p. 311).

The selection of cases follows from this theoretical argument. The Wolof in Senegal are a pre-colonial society with long-standing experience of stateness. Although an ethnic understanding of the category “Wolof” tended to be an “obsession of European visitors and residents”, thus becoming a relevant “category in administrative reports and statistics” (p. 294), under French colonial rule and in the post-independence period it was rarely mobilized for political purposes. The situation is different in the neighbouring British colony of Gambia, where the Wolof, as a threatened minority, mobilized ethnic arguments in pursuing political claims. The Temne in northern Sierra Leone are treated as an example of a pre-colonial stateless society, which, since the nineteenth century, has relied on ethnic solidarity in conflicts with neighbouring groups and in warfare waged in the context of slave-raiding. With the *pax colonia* and the enforcement of colonial rule, the emphasis on ethnicity declined but experienced a resurgence in the 1950s, when newly established political parties needed to mobilize popular support. The third case, the Ewe along the present-day Ghana-Togo border, represents a mixed situation in which pre-colonial state structures existed, but were highly fragmented. British attempts to amalgamate smaller Ewe chiefdoms into larger administrative territories on the basis of “tribal” commonalities were met with bitter local resistance, at least from those communities expected to subordinate themselves to larger entities. Here, in past and present conflicts over land rights, rules of chiefly succession, and political hierarchies, we primarily see the mobilization of sub-regional identifications and local divisions, rather than invocations of the larger linguistic-ethnic group. Only from the 1940s to the mid-1950s did the idea of an encompassing Ewe-ness play an important role, becoming internationally relevant during negotiations over the future status of the UN trusteeship territory. According to Keese, after the plebiscite of 1957 and the partition of the Ewe between Togo and Ghana, the “pan-Ewe” argument became irrelevant. However, researchers of post-independence Ghana have observed that the Ewe in particular are subject to suspicions of their transnational ethnic loyalties undermining their patriotism.

Keese’s complex and sometimes overwhelmingly detailed accounts are organized according to a historical periodization that is implicitly based on the assumption that the invocation of ethnicity (on the part of both Europeans and Africans) varied over the course of colonial history. The first phase, the period shortly before colonial conquest and the early years of colonial rule until roughly World War I, was for many African societies a time of considerable insecurity as a result of the shift in economic activity towards the production of “legal” export crops (often using slave labour, which led to slave raids plaguing the hinterland)

and the formation of complex local alliances with or against the European residents. How Africans responded depended, according to Keese, on pre-colonial experiences with stateness. The establishment of colonial administrative structures during the second phase (1918 until 1945) made European notions of tribal constitution and “authentic” indigenous rule relevant, and local power-holders, chiefs in particular, had to contend with these in the pursuit of their own political interests. The third period (from 1945 on) was characterized by attempted modernization, political reform, the introduction of participation rights, and the creation of political parties – changes that “seemed to create a massive feeling of instability”, which often “led to a preference of local populations for ethnic instead of other forms of mobilization” (p. 310). Clear is that – contrary to the accounts from the “colonial invention of ethnicity” perspective – it was not always the colonial masters, but rather African actors, who brought ethnicity into play. Conversely, colonial invocations of ethnicity were not always adopted by local actors.

Keese’s case studies are based on analyses of written sources from no fewer than fifteen colonial and missionary archives in Europe and Africa as well as innumerable secondary sources, the listing of which comprises an impressive fifty pages. Although there are limits to a study that reconstructs “the African voice” largely on the basis of documents written by Europeans – an issue the author reflects on critically (pp. 19–26) – the study also shows that one can reconstruct with perspicacity and sensitivity the positions, strategies, and arguments of African actors. However, to enrich his account of the independent mobilization of ethnicity on the part of African actors he might also have included a case taken from the “hinterland”, where local societies did not have long-standing contacts with Europeans. Unfortunately, though, sources are sparse, and even a careful analysis of oral traditions does not permit the researcher to look back farther than the mid-nineteenth century.

Keese’s reliance on colonial (and missionary) sources entails a second limitation, which the author does not explicitly reflect. The sources tend to document actions that were mostly politically motivated, thus privileging an instrumental understanding of ethnicity. Yet, other studies show that the attractiveness of ethnicity as a resource in the making of communities rests on its multidimensionality, i.e. that it can mean different things to different actors. But Keese does not consider instances such as the significance of ethnicity in bonds of solidarity among migrant workers, or its importance in conflicts over group-internal differences in wealth, over the norms of redistribution, or the reordering of relations between the sexes or between generations. Nor does Keese mention the complex processes underlying the cultural construction of ethnicity (during and after colonial rule), and we are told very little about how non-elite Africans appropriate ethnic arguments, or how they integrate these into their everyday practices (which most certainly can affect whether and how ethnicity functions to mobilize political support or opposition).

Ultimately, although Keese does refute the one-sided insistence of the colonial invention of ethnicity in Africa, the proponents of the “invention of ethnicity” thesis have themselves already discussed the complex interplay between African and European actors in the creation of ethnic identifications. Further, scholars including Thomas Spear, Paul Nugent, and myself have examined the possible pre-colonial sources of ethnic thinking. The argument that the category of ethnicity became particularly important to those colonial administrations governing societies not constituted by pre-colonial states is also one that has already been made by Paul Nugent and myself in *Ethnicity in Ghana*<sup>1</sup> (which oddly is not cited).

1. Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (eds), *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention* (Houndmills, 2000).

Yet, the strength of Keese's study is that it provides rigorous empirical grounding for this perspective through a comprehensive, historically deep and meaningfully comparative study. Rarely has an author so convincingly demonstrated the flexibility not only of the use of ethnic idioms in the pursuit of political interests, but also of the non-use of such idioms by both African and European actors. In this respect, the book makes an outstanding contribution to the discussion of ethnicity in Africa and elsewhere and ought to appeal to a broad readership.

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SEIBERT, JULIA. *In die globale Wirtschaft gezwungen. Arbeit und kolonialer Kapitalismus im Kongo (1885–1960)*. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt [etc.] 2016. 247 pp. Ill. Maps. € 39.95.

This book looks at the transformation of forced labour to wage labour in the Congo Free State and later Belgian Congo between 1885–1960. The argument developed in the book is that the introduction of “free labour” was paradoxically based on violence and coercion, a mere continuation of the atrocious labour practices under the concessionary rule of the Congo Free State (1885–1908). What follows is a fascinating description of social change under colonial rule as a consequence of the process of the forced introduction of free labour. Eventually, the author argues, this had an impact on the Congolese struggle for independence. Unfortunately, being only in German, the book will probably not reach the majority of its potential readership in the field of Congo studies.

A labour history of former Belgian Congo is long overdue. Much scholarly (and popular) work has been dedicated to the labour atrocities under concessionary rule in the era of the Congo Free State, which to some may leave the impression that the Belgian takeover marked an end to the worst atrocities. The transformation of the labour system as an outcome of the change from concessionary rule to colonial rule offers interesting insights into the continuities of forced labour after the Belgian takeover, as well as on what went on behind the façade of so-called free labour in Belgian Congo specifically. Seibert's work is evidently strongly influenced by the seminal work on concessionary rule in Equatorial Africa by Coquery-Vidrovitch.<sup>1</sup> This economic history unravels how French colonial rule was established through concessionary companies, and how the concessionary regime was transformed and eventually dismantled. Moreover, the study argues that concessionary rule caused such deep economic and social rupture that its demographic effects caused a crisis of underpopulation that had still not yet been overcome by the 1970s, when the book was published. In addition, Coquery-Vidrovitch argues that the roots of post-colonial economic structures in former French Equatorial Africa lie in the concessionary rule.

1. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Paris, 1972).