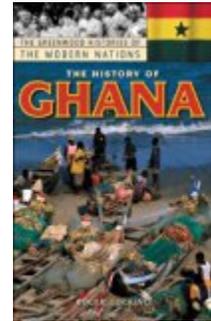


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger S. Gocking. *The History of Ghana*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005. xxxiii + 330 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31894-8.

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A Political History of Modern Ghana

Roger Gocking's *The History of Ghana* is the latest contribution to *The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations* series. The series is publisher-driven, with editors selecting both the states addressed by each volume and the authors who write the texts. The intended audience is not historians, but instead members of the public who have a need to understand the historical context of a modern state—perhaps bureaucrats and business people, among others. Each volume focuses chiefly, albeit not exclusively, on the country's history following the Second World War, and is written from a political perspective, and clearly intended to function as a guide to help Americans navigate the Ghanaian bureaucracy for business or official purposes. It is a formula seemingly calculated to draw uninspired prose and simplistic analysis from even the most talented author.

It is therefore to Gocking's credit that that he is able to develop a balanced and complex narrative that gives readers a sense of both continuity and transformation in Ghanaian history. Make no mistake, this is not a cultural or social history. Even the author's acceptance of the boundaries of the modern state of Ghana as a unit of enquiry speaks to the statal focus of this study.

The opening section on geomorphology and ecology is straightforward but limited, and a subsequent section focusing on ethnicity and religion has clearly been carved down in successive revisions. Material seen as superfluous to the framing of a political history is simply not included.

The second chapter on pre-colonial states and soci-

eties is similarly superficial. Because Ghana was not a coherent, distinct political unit prior to the nineteenth-century periods of Asante and British hegemony, Gocking has some problems developing themes around which to build his narrative. If there is one guiding purpose, it is to establish Ghanaians as political actors. With limited success he distinguishes between state-building in northern and southern Ghana. The former he ties to the spread of the Sudanic model from the West African savanna, the latter he discusses in the context of Atlantic commerce. The next step in Gocking's narrative is the Asante-British dynamic of the nineteenth century, which the author recounts mostly from a coastal and British perspective. Throughout these early chapters, issues peripheral to the author's interpretation are ignored—the Atlantic slave trade, for instance, receives only a bare mention. In a text aimed at specialists, omissions such as this one would not be acceptable, and even in such a general work I have some problems accepting certain exclusions. Clearly material was jettisoned to make room for in-depth analysis of the twentieth century, and one can almost feel the author's frustration at being forced into paring away the many layers of historical analysis he might otherwise have included.

The four chapters that cover the period of formal colonial rule are far more complex. Gocking uses the relationship between colonial officials, chiefs, and the formally educated classes ("educated natives") as a vehicle for discussing political and intellectual developments. Although this leaves him open to charges of undertaking an elite history, the presentation is successful in estab-

lishing many of the core issues that he will later develop as driving issues of the post-colonial period: constitutionalism, the legal system, cocoa politics, and the ongoing dispute over the role of chiefs. Towards the end of this middle section, as Gocking ushers the text into the mid-twentieth-century struggle for independence, he finally introduces us to the “people”: cocoa farmers, town dwellers, and ex-servicemen. He correctly emphasizes popular revolt as the key to decolonization, and puts Kwame Nkrumah forward as the catalyst who transformed widespread displeasure into nationalist struggle. With this expansion of focus the author is ready to build a truly complex and inclusive model of political and economic interaction. Yet one cannot help but feel that there were places where a discussion of the role of non-elite Ghanaians would have been both appropriate and enriching.

It is easy to get lost in the next seven chapters, which cover the political history of the independent state of Ghana and make up the bulk of the text. The increasing complexity is not the fault of the author, but reflects both the great intricacy and the apparent repetitiveness of Ghanaian politics. The hope that accompanied the elevation of Nkrumah as the first president of an independent Ghana was followed by various crises of corruption, political centralization, party politics, and dissatisfaction within the armed forces. The subsequent coup replaced the increasingly autocratic Convention People’s Party administration with a military-led National Liberation Council. In 1969 the military authorities allowed elections that brought to power an axis of anti-Nkrumahists called the Progress Party (PP) and led by an old rival, Dr. Kofi Busia. The initial favor with which Ghanaians viewed the PP faded, however, as the country spiraled in decline and the result was a coup by more junior and leftist officers (some with Nkrumahist leanings) known as the National Redemption Council (NRC). However the NRC presided over a deteriorating economy as well, and resorted to authoritarianism, prompting yet another group of junior officers led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings to seize power in 1979. In subsequent elections, the Nkrumahist People’s National Party came to power, but failed to raise the standard of living. As a result, Rawlings took power back from the civilians in a 1981 coup, establishing the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC). Under Rawlings the PNDC presided over one of the most difficult periods in Ghanaian history, and slowly shifted from socialist idealism to structured development and liberalization in an attempt to pull the country out of its slump. Despite some authori-

tarian leanings, Rawlings managed to escape many of the errors of his predecessors and was rewarded with victory in a 1992 election in which he defeated the heirs to the Nkrumahist and Busiaist parties to take power as a civilian leader. Rawlings’s National Democratic Congress (NDC) held power until 2001, when the New Patriotic Party of John Kufuor took power in a free election. Jerry Rawlings thus became the first Ghanaian president to successfully complete his term and step down peacefully.

If this all sounds confusing—“and to all but political scholars of modern Ghana it will”—it also reveals the great challenge facing Gocking in bringing a dense and unfamiliar history to a non-academic readership. His relative success reflects the author’s great strengths. The first is that he truly understands Ghanaian political, legal, and constitutional history, as his publishing record illustrates. Gocking is well known for his work on the interface between colonial and customary courts as well as for his probing analysis of the “educated natives” who left a deep legacy on the Ghanaian political system. The second is that the author is able to thread certain underlying narratives through successive administrations. One of the most intriguing is the recurring role played by cocoa prices in Ghana’s political history. The colonial administration’s treatment of diseases that afflicted cocoa rallied rural constituencies to the independence movement. Declining cocoa prices helped doom Kwame Nkrumah’s administration in the 1960s whereas stabilizing prices early in Rawling’s first regime enabled the nation’s economic recovery in the 1980s. Finally, the attempt to escape dependence on cocoa was recently manifest in the dispute over value added taxes.

Readers getting bogged down in the plethora of acronyms can escape by grasping hold of a narrative, whether cocoa, class, or constitutionalism. Gocking superbly brings these strands together to interrogate three major events in the political history of Ghana: independence, the overthrow of Nkrumah, and the election of John Kufuor in 2001. In each case, Gocking halts the narrative for a moment to give wide play not only to political and economic but also global and socio-cultural issues.

In addition, Gocking provides a respectable timeline, short biographies, and a guide to currency evaluation that will be useful for the uninitiated. Conversely, the brief bibliography is a little uneven. Like the book, it is up to date for the recent past but missing several key texts for the colonial and pre-colonial periods. Still, the entire package is a compelling one for an individual seeking to become conversant with the political trends that have

shaped modern Ghana.

This is not to say that the book is without its problems. Both people and places disappear from the narrative at times. Asante and the north, especially, are not mentioned for long stretches. The book's early focus on the educated classes and chiefly officeholders also makes it appear as if non-elite Ghanaians only emerged as a political factor from whole-cloth in the 1950s. Additionally, some concepts like Akanization and groups like the Mande-speaking Dyula traders are thrown in without explanation. One can also take issue with the offhand way with which culture is treated or, rather, ignored. Anyone wanting a relatively complete modern history of Ghana will need to read both this text and Salm and Falola's *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (2002).

Some reviewers will undoubtedly dismiss Gocking's *The History of Ghana* as a non-academic text. However the author deserves quite a bit of credit. Operating within rather constrictive boundaries he is nevertheless able to elucidate important themes and develop a narrative that can be read either as simple or complex. Certainly, this text will become a standard reference for a student planning to study modern Ghanaian history, and as a reference for scholars it is superior to previous works.

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