

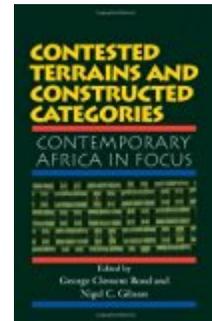
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George Clement Bond, Nigel C. Gibson. *Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories: Contemporary Africa in Focus*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2002. 474 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3678-7.

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African Studies in Focus

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Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories is a collection of essays drawn from lectures presented to graduate and advanced undergraduate students at Columbia University in a series of seminars on African studies. Because the lectures (which form the basis of this volume) were originally designed with students in mind, *Contested Terrains* is also a ready-to-use textbook. And it is unlike many other books marketed as textbooks, which are in fact barely modified research monographs that may be too specialized and narrowly focused to create a forum for engaging with the wide-ranging concerns of a class or seminar. This volume is particularly suited for graduate seminars organized on themes such as current debates in African studies, African studies and the social sciences, methodological issues in African studies, and re-defining African studies today.

The volume is divided into three sections, each containing several essays. The first section is titled, "Challenging Modes of Thinking," the second focuses on contested categories in politics, the economy and civil society, and the third section deals with what might be called "body politics." Unlike many other African studies books destined for a student audience, this volume contains material that will hopefully encourage students to reflect on their own position as emerging scholars within the discipline. The introductory chapter by Bond and Gibson starts with a brief history of African stud-

ies as a scholarly discipline, highlighting the contribution of African scholars, the sometimes contentious relationships between African and non-African scholars, and the politics involved in setting research agendas. The introductory chapter further identifies the main questions to be considered in the essays: "Which scholars are best qualified and entitled to describe the daily lives of African peoples? Which theoretical paradigms may best explain the economic, political, and social conditions of Africa? Should African studies include the entire continent or regions south of the Sahara" (p. 2)? To respond to these questions, individual chapters deal with political developments, the history of property rights, questions of ethnicity, civil society, gender, and public health, among others. Many of the chapters present specific case studies pertaining to particular African countries, including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, Madagascar, Ghana, Uganda, and Angola. The time frame covered in the different essays extends from the colonial period to the 1990s with references to the wars in Angola and Mozambique, post-Apartheid South Africa, AIDS, and Structural Adjustment Programs.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Contested Terrains* lies in the ability of contributors to respond to on-going debates while avoiding facile answers to complex problems and encouraging readers to question both scholarly and popular interpretations of events in Africa. For example, Paul Zeleza systematically addresses the problems associated with commonly used categories pertaining to

African studies in his chapter on writing African economic history. In another chapter, Sayre Schatz takes on the claims made in support of Structural Adjustment Programs in Africa, showing why these claims deserve to be contested. George Bond and Joan Vincent's chapter on AIDS in Uganda identifies lacunae in the unfolding research agenda on HIV/AIDS in one specific African context. They call attention to the widespread tendency of discussing transmission of HIV solely in connection with individual sexual behaviors and divorced from larger patterns of social organization such as the expansion of capitalist production, of urban salaried employment, rural poverty and violent upheaval. Meredith Turshen makes a similar point in her chapter on public health policy in Africa but also draws out the policy implications when individuals in their private lives rather than public institutions are assigned primary responsibility for responding to major health crises.

The most useful chapters start off with a succinct overview of recent debates on the topic at hand with references to the leading figures associated with various positions in these debates. Thus, Alcinda Howana prefaces her chapter on therapies used to help former child soldiers in Mozambique and Angola with a summary of recent discussions on child soldiers and the social construction of childhood around the world. In addition to examining land claims among the Asante over a hundred year period exam, Sara Berry's article also considers scholarly debates around the question of property rights in Africa between the 1960s and 1990s. This approach provides a useful archive of references for students who may wish to explore a specific debate further. In addition to giving a practical demonstration of how and why certain interpretations can be questioned, many authors also raise additional questions that students can be encouraged to investigate independently and which might help them in formulating their own research agendas. The extensive list of references at the end of the volume is a good place

to start in pursuing some of these leads. Yet other essays such as those by Lesley Sharp and Lynette Jackson offer students a model for using ethnographic material.

While *Contested Terrains* does have a definite bias towards the social sciences, I think it makes helpful reading for graduate students in any branch of African studies, including those working in literary and cultural studies who may arrive for graduate study without a scholarly grounding for analyzing the broader social issues confronting the societies whose cultural production might be of interest to them. The methodological questions raised are ones that all students in African studies, and many of those in anthropology and cultural studies, should be familiar with. Furthermore, the material is presented without an excessive reliance on tables and statistical data that might put off students who are not trained in the social sciences.

In its function as textbook, there are, in my opinion, few criticisms to level against this volume. Only the essay by Lesley Sharp seems to have escaped some degree of editorial oversight. For example, "martial arts" is written as "marshall arts," (pp. 332), and the French word *brousse* is misspelled as "brusse" (pp. 328). There are a few other similar mistakes in Sharp's essay. Though regrettable, these easily corrected errors do not detract from the substantive arguments presented either in Sharp's essay or other chapters. All in all, this is a well-written and easily readable volume especially for students, but equally for faculty overseeing a multidisciplinary seminar in African studies.

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