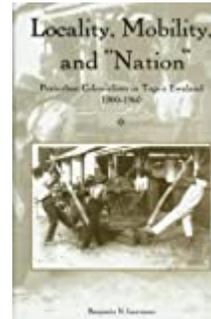




**Benjamin N. Lawrance.** *Locality, Mobility, and "Nation": Periurban Colonialism in Togo's Eweland, 1900-1960.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007. Illustrations. xi + 288 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-264-8.



**Reviewed by** Michelle Moyd

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## Colonial Prisms: Togo's Eweland, Colonialisms, and Ethnonationalism

New conceptual frameworks for thinking about the past often emerge from historians' struggles to overcome unhelpful, worn-out dichotomies used to describe social relations. Such is the case with Benjamin Lawrance's *Locality, Mobility, and "Nation": Periurban Colonialism in Togo's Eweland, 1900-1960*. This ambitious and detailed study of the historical development of ethnonationalist sensibilities among the Ewe peoples of Togo analyzes one of the most complicated colonial histories of the twentieth century. Togo may be a small nation, but its particular multilayered experiences of colonialism afford historians the opportunity to compare different colonial structures and practices across temporal boundaries. Lawrance's approach thus encourages us to take a long view of African political movements. In *Locality, Mobility, and "Nation,"* Ewe peoples' experiences of several different kinds of colonialism (German, British, French, mandate, formal, periurban) helped produce "Ewe-ness," a cultural and political identity that shaped Togolese nationalism into the 1960s.

Countering tendencies in the literature on African

nationalism to focus narrowly on urban male elites' contributions to African nationalist movements, Lawrance instead directs our attention to what he calls the "periurban zone" (p. 2). It was here, according to Lawrance, that rural and urban Ewe men and women shaped an ethnonational identity in the first half of the twentieth century. He then proposes using the term "periurban colonialism" to "highlight the fact that there was a special space where the urban and rural worlds conjoined in complex ways that were neither rural nor urban, but instead shared characteristics and social processes of change" (p. 3). Lawrance argues that this new prism on colonial experience will "[reshape] our historical understanding of the contours of the later nationalist struggle" (p. 2) because it allows us to see the gendered, generational, and local impulses behind involvement in anticolonial actions.

Lawrance argues that "mandate colonialism" in Eweland produced a "qualitatively different" form of colonialism than elsewhere in French West Africa, as well as a "qualitatively different form of engagement by and

of colonial subjects” (pp. 42, 43). Between 1885 and 1956, first German, then British and French colonizers, administered what is now the nation-state of Togo. During World War I, German Togoland was the first of Germany’s four African colonies to be defeated by Allied forces. The British and French then occupied the former German colony until 1919. After the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations appointed Britain and France as mandate powers over the territory, with the British assuming control of the westernmost portion of Togoland, and the French maintaining control over the remainder. French and British authorities set up new kinds of “native administrations” that were meant in part to distinguish themselves from the Germans. German colonizers had “splintered” (p. 32) larger Ewe political units into smaller ones in order to weaken older local political authority. At the same time, German colonizers centralized economic power by relocating Togoland’s capital to the coastal town of Lomé (pp. 32-33). They thus laid the foundation for the “periurban zone” that, according to Lawrance, played such a critical role in shaping Ewe ethnonationalism. The international mandate system added yet another layer of administrative oversight—however ineffective or unresponsive to African appeals—through the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC).

French “mandate colonialism” differed not only from German and British colonialism, but also from French colonial practices in the rest of French West Africa. In Lawrance’s formulation, “the periurban colonial administration was the bedrock of the French colonial economy in Eweland” (p. 47). Most importantly, French policies of direct taxation and census-taking, enforced by appointed chiefs and backed by the threat of force, became the source of much “suffering, humiliation, and struggle” (p. 61) among periurban Ewe who questioned the chiefs’ legitimacy. Lawrance sums up this transformation beautifully in chapter 2: “Over a period of several decades the chief ceased to be judge and conciliator, becoming instead census officer, taxman, informant, lackey, and collaborator. The disjuncture between the traditional and the new indigenous networks of chiefly power resulted in a chief often being forced to decide between serving his village and obeying the French” (p. 56). Ewe who could not, or who refused to, pay taxes often fled to other parts of French Togo, to British Togoland, or to the relative anonymity of Lomé. Based on these observations, Lawrance argues that population movements in French Togo, especially between rural and the urban spaces, had a direct link to periurban colonial praxis. Ewe ethnonationalism arose in part out of resistance to the “centraliz-

ing tendencies of French periurban colonialism” (p. 68).

Each chapter of *Locality, Mobility, and “Nation”* explores an aspect of how Ewe men and women in the periurban zone dealt with the “vicissitudes” (p. 3) of colonial rule, while also defending and honing Ewe-ness as a coherent local and increasingly, *the* “national” identity of Togo. Perhaps of most interest to readers of this list, chapter 5 analyzes the role of the Bund der deutschen Togoländer (German Togo-Bund) in anticolonial nationalist politics during the interwar period. This enigmatic organization was founded in 1924, ostensibly to fight for “Togolese” interests on the international stage. In a series of petitions sent to the PMC between 1925 and 1937, Bund leaders argued for the return of the mandates to Germany, and the reunification of Togoland under German oversight. They also explicitly argued against French mandate colonialism and its abuses (p. 130). Although they claimed to represent pan-Togolese interests, in fact most of the membership of the Bund was Ewe. Consequently, most of the issues the Bund brought to the attention of the PMC centered on Ewe concerns, despite their claim to speak for all Togolese. For its part, the PMC consistently ignored Bund petitions, claiming that the documents were written in the wrong language, or that they did not adopt the required deferential tone.

The French also did their best to obstruct Bund access to the PMC and to the international press. Meanwhile, German colonial revisionist agitators sought to publicize the Bund’s case as much as possible as part of their efforts to convince the League of Nations that their former colonies should be returned to Germany. In 1933, an anticolonial revolt in Lomé, coupled with Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, caused British and French colonial officials to clamp down on “the Bund and all things German” (p. 141). In October 1933, the Bund “relaunched” (p. 142) itself as the Togo National League. Drawing now on a “dispersed network of grassroots activism,” it began redirecting its anticolonial energies towards the British mandate authorities, who were now blamed for regional agricultural decline experienced under the mandate (p. 144). Pro-German sentiment continued, with Togo National League members seeking out German agricultural expertise to help improve farming for British Togoland. The Bund’s pro-German sentiment is difficult to interpret and, according to Lawrance, “does not neatly fit in any category” (p. 126). Chapter 5 makes clear that Bund members wanted the international community to recognize the harm that the French and British mandates were doing to the Ewe, and by extension, to all Togolese. Bund efforts to reinstate Germany as their colonial rulers

should be seen primarily as a protest against conditions in Togoland, as well as an early attempt to create an Ewe ethnonational identity that would speak for all of Togo.

Much can be said about the strengths of Lawrance's book. For example, it draws on intriguing, yet underused, archival materials, most notably the aforementioned petitions sent to the PMC articulating Ewe/Togolese grievances against French mandate rule. Lawrance incorporates colorful perspectives gathered from interviews conducted with Togolese who lived through the period. His focus on "mandate colonialism" offers a novel comparative and temporal angle on colonial practice, as does his focus on the "periurban zone." Chapter 4, which examines Ewe politico-religious practices and power in relation to French efforts to regulate such practices, is a brilliant example of how to use a local case to tell a larger story about the limits of colonial power and authority. Throughout the book, Lawrance provides fine examples of how historians can fruitfully move beyond the "colonial encounter" model in explaining how Africans and Europeans "operationalized the functions of the periurban zone" (p. 3).

Lawrance's book is complex and ambitious, which sometimes makes it difficult to follow. For example, it lacks both a glossary and list of abbreviations. In a similar vein, a timeline of significant dates would have helped readers follow Togoland's cultural and social history more easily. Conceptually, the author wants to give his readers new tools with which to understand colonial praxis. While such critical work can only be applauded, the term "periurban" is somewhat overused, and does not always seem applicable to the examples under discussion. Certainly it does not bear the conceptual weight Lawrance attributes to it in his introduction. Similarly, the introduction provides an enticing argument about "spatiality" as a helpful new frame for understanding African colonial experiences. Yet the spatial element, as a conceptual frame, falls away in the book's remaining chapters. On the whole however, *Locality, Mobility, and "Nation"* gives scholars in the fields of African history and comparative colonial histories plenty to think about as they continue to go about the work of explaining what the "colonial encounter" was really all about.

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