

R.E. Downs and S.P. Reyna (eds.) 1988, *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa*, Hanover: University of New Hampshire, London: University Press of New England.

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- 1 In the six years since it was published, *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa* has remained one of the most innovative and significant contributions to theories and research on land tenure systems in Africa. Although the sixteen contributors to the volume come from academic, development, and policy backgrounds, the vast majority are anthropologists and all have followed an anthropological approach in their field research or in their use of anthropological literature. This disciplinary propensity, combined with an astute selection of some of the key land tenure theorists and policy advisors, provides the essential background for a work focused on the hitherto much neglected institutional bases for land holding.
- 2 The book begins with a foreword by one of the great social anthropologists on Africa, John Middleton, whose work in political anthropology, religion, and social organization, mostly based on research in East Africa, are classics. From there, the volume draws on examples from societies in East, Central and West sub-Saharan Africa to identify the basic trends in land holding which are common to most African countries, as well as some processes unique to specific locales.
- 3 The implicit definition of land tenure which is adopted in the volume, follows in the tradition of Gluckman, as "the system of relations between people and groups expressed in terms of their mutual rights and obligations with regard to land". Land

only acquires meaning, value, and utility in relation to the people and institutions who occupy, claim rights to, and manipulate this resource.

- 4 The complexity of indigenous land tenure in Africa is accurately portrayed through an analysis of a wide range of rights (use, exclusion, transfer, etc.) to natural resources which overlap in space and time. This complexity causes land tenure systems to respond differently to changing social, economic, political and environmental processes. Concentration, fragmentation, commercialization, and restriction of land use, are some of the current trends in land tenure systems examined in the volume. These processes are aggravated by rapid population growth and environmental degradation which place increased pressure and provoke competition over existing landed resources. However, the relationship between these trends are not always as clear cut as they might seem. For example, several analyses insightfully refute simplistic correlations between growing commercialisation and privatisation.
- 5 The book makes an important contribution to anthropological and social change theory by devoting significant attention to the role of the State in land tenure systems. Covering cases ranging from tiny Sao Tomé e Príncipe where the State owns 90% of the land, to the parastatal development corporations in West Africa which increasingly dictate local use and tenure rights to land, the book adeptly documents the intended and unintended effects of State intervention in African land tenure systems.
- 6 If there are any shortcomings in the book, they are, first, that cases from Southern Africa were excluded from consideration, despite the fact that land tenure has been, perhaps, the central issue in recent political changes in that region. Secondly, many contributors to the volume make the implicit assumption that indigenous land tenure systems in some way provided a more equitable distribution of resources than those introduced under colonial rule and post-Independence regimes. While this assumption would seem to be intuitively sound to most anthropologists, more comparative evidence might have been mustered and analyzed explicitly to support the supposition. These weaknesses are, nonetheless, minor when compared to the perspicacity and originality of its contents.
- 7 The book is essential for universities and institutes working on agrarian change and development in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the noted ephemeral quality of much scholarship associated with development, the scholarship and commitment of this book will stand the test of time.