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pp. 134-136

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.17.1.2259
Available at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol17/iss1/10

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The book A Country of Defiance: Mapping the Casamance in Senegal narrates the story of a people, their grievances, land, and resources, highlighting centuries of exploitation by various groups, including European traders, colonialists, slave raiders, and missionaries. It covers topics such as identity formation, European colonial competition for people and resources, self-determination, and the impact of various forms of domination on people, their spaces, and places, specifically focusing on the peoples of the Casamance (a region in southern modern-day Senegal).

In this book, Deets demonstrates exceptional skill in narrating complex stories straightforwardly, using five spaces in the Casamance. These five spaces form the main chapters of the book, represented by “The River,” “The Rice Field,” “The Forest,” “The School,” and ‘The Stadium.’ They provide a narrated background to the story of Casamance’s formation, cultural identity, and the emergence of separatist ideals.

“The River” explores the origins of Casamance, while “The Rice Field” and “The Forest” delve into the spaces where cultural identities are formed. “The School” examines the role of education in propagating collective memory, and “The Stadium” highlights the arenas where the definitions of Casamance and Senegalese identity are contested and expressed.

Using the Casamance River as a focal point, the book traces the emergence of the Casamance identity, starting with narratives of Portuguese incursions in the 16th century and the ensuing competition among colonial agents from Portugal, France, and Britain. It further explores identity formation and transformation, highlighting the mobility and colonial rivalry over control of Casamance among Europeans and the local resistance to such conquests, exemplified by figures like Foday Sylla, who contested these incursions.
The River chapter also highlights contemporary efforts by the Senegalese state to shape the discourse of Casamance, alongside the counteractions of individuals like Rev. Fr. Augustin Diamacoune, Salif Sadiq, and Mamadou’ Nkrumah’ Sane, among others. These figures, representing various factions of the Mouvement des Forces Democratiques de la Casamance or, in English, Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), advocate for greater autonomy or independence for the region. Moreover, the narrative acknowledges the role of ‘ordinary’ people in Casamance, shaping who they are and the meanings that they attach to the spaces and places (p. 61).

“The Rice” field continued the narratives of identity formation, including the gender division of labour and how this space is contested and used to frame grievances. The story of the priestess, Aline Sitoe Diatta, who died in a colonial prison in Timbuktu, Mali, in 1944 (p. 80), underscores the height of peasant resistance against colonialism, a narrative contemporary MFDC followers leverage to their benefit. “The Forest,” or the sacred forest of Casamance, has for centuries been both a victim of exploitation and a stage for resistance. In recent times, the sacred forest has provided symbolic narratives and strengths that the MFDC taps into for their self-determination arguments and also served as a refuge for separatists in what is known as “Africa’s longest-running civil conflict” (p. 7).

“The School” served as the breeding ground for the Senegalese nationalists as well as that of the Casamance, thereby serving as a space where the nation is imagined to support the Senegalese state but also where such imagination is contested (p. 125). “The Stadium” became another site which turned from space to place due to the manifestation of identity therein (p. 11). With the sports stadium, national and sectional identities were formed and contested, where identities can be fluid and, at times, ambiguous. Within this place, stories of how sports and separatism were told. Despite the efforts from both sides contesting for the soul of the Casamance, everyday people within the location have a say; while some collaborated with the “separatists,” others contested or ignored them.

Despite his tenure as a diplomat for the US in Senegal, Deets strived to maintain neutrality in his portrayal of individuals and events throughout the book. This effort is particularly commendable given the
context of the of diplomatic discourse, which, as Neumann (2005, p. 72) asserts “carries with it the memory of its history, and that history is a Western history.’ Nonetheless, the assertion that the colonial enterprise “brought ‘The Casamance’ into being” (p. 181) might be viewed by some post-colonial scholars and pan-Africanists as reminiscent of hegemonic colonial narratives that frame the discovery of people and their lands in a certain light.

Despite the complex history and diverse lived experiences of the Casamance people, Deets masterfully recounts their stories. He delves into their grievances, aspirations for self-determination, and the dynamic between being “mapped” by others and “mapping” themselves, shedding light on the evolution of their identities in an accessible and engaging way. This method allows a broader audience to grasp and appreciate the intricate dynamics of Casamance as A Country of Defiance. Building on this, I argue that Deets also highlights a transborder, low-intensity conflict in the region with the potential for escalation due to the increased ease of making and using weaponized drones, coupled with the rising insecurity in West Africa.

This book is highly recommended for history students and scholars and would benefit security scholars and practitioners interested in the history of Casamance, Senegal, and, indeed, West Africa.

References