

***Researching Power and Identity in African State Formation*, by M. R. Doornbos and W. M. J. van Binsbergen**

Unisa Press. 2017. pp. 544.
ISBN: 978-1-86888-657-9

Reviewed by Jean-Jacques Boshoff
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3477-4218>
University of South Africa
bshoj@unisa.ac.za

This book provides a dense overview of the interconnected dynamics that explain the linkage between power and identity as an amalgamation of the African state. It confronts the essentialist assumptions of social interaction in African political systems by conceptualising the role of power and identity in the African state. The book expands on the debates that have shaped the discourse on identity politics in Africa by comprehensively analysing the larger geopolitical and historical dynamics that have shaped African political systems. It argues that the political structures of postcolonial African societies should be understood for its logical patterns of social interactions and should not be conceptualised in abstract terms of esotericism. The book compartmentalises the dynamics of the power-identity nexus in terms of groups, ethnicities, religions, and classes.

The authors rely on their three decades of immersion in the empirical exploration of and academic engagement with the theoretical and methodological developments that have characterised African studies. The transcultural perspective adopted to study the topic of this publication is of interest to social scientists in various disciplines. It dexterously incorporates a comprehensive range of primary and secondary sources that recognise the balance between theoretical discussions and “local-level” empirical data and that explain it through the power-identity nexus. Adopting an exploratory approach, the authors identify the fundamental dynamics of identity politics by fleshing out the dimensions of power and identity according to the themes of colonial incorporation, political penetration, ethnicity, the relationship between traditional authorities and cultural protest, religion and the state, and the formation of national politics. The authors



draw on their academic experience in citing an extensive range of case studies and giving a comprehensive account of African state formation.

Through the use of a comparative perspective—incorporating interviews, action research, participant observation, and research into oral history, archival materials, songs and constitutional texts—the authors elucidate their analysis and interpretation of state formation in Africa. Using the power-identity nexus as foundation, the authors are able to disentangle the theoretical discussions of identity politics in Africa by interrogating the social, cultural and political interactions that characterise Africa's social and political transformations. The book appropriately introduces archival material and primary sources to reveal the link between the postcolonial state in Africa and its relationship with dynamics of the past.

This book makes a significant intellectual contribution to existing debates on state formation in Africa, providing archival material that addresses the ideas of state, power, ethnicity, and the dynamics of religion in the postcolonial state. It encourages a revival of research on identity politics in the African context but at the same time advocates a reconsideration of the way this research is done. It recommends that future intellectual endeavours challenge the hegemonic assumptions of state, power and identity politics in Africa.