

James Barnes, *Gabon, Beyond the Colonial Legacy*, Boulder:  
Westview Press, 1992 163 pages.

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African books - let alone those on Francophone states - published in English are scarce. Indeed, they are few and far between. Researchers, teachers, scholars and even general readers often rely on encyclopaedias, newspapers, magazines and outdated texts for information on these countries. One of such micro states with scanty literature in English is the central African country - Gabon.

Ohio University political science professor James F. Barnes has done a great service to African studies by focusing on this Francophone African territory. His book *Gabon: Beyond the Colonial Legacy* provides an analytical overview of the history, political economy, culture and social structure of this sparsely populated but mineral rich central African state. In many respects, he has embarked upon a pioneering mission.

Written in Lucid and vivid language, the book consists of 6 chapters:

- 1) Early History to independence;
- 2) THE Post Independence Era;
- 3) The Economy;
- 4) The Society;
- 5) Foreign Relations and
- 6) Looking to the Future.

A central thesis of the book is that Gabon's identity as a modern state is indelibly marked by its long-standing relationship with Europe and the United States. As Barnes asserts:

*Gabon's transition from colony to nation-state barely disturbed the pattern of economic relationships with France. At the time of independence in 1960, the French concluded a number of agreements with the Gabonese that guaranteed a continuing, preeminent role for the French in Gabonese economic affairs.*

In a balanced and brilliant style, Barnes addresses burning issues which are pertinent to Gabon in particular and Francophone Africa in general. Typically, he sets out to answer fundamental but pertinent questions germane to that nation. How did Gabon emerge as a modern state? Which were the major ethnic groups that existed or migrated into Gabon? What role did imperial

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masters especially the French play in the birth of Gabon? Who were the first leaders of Gabon? How is the Gabonese polity, society, culture and social system functioning in the post independence era? With the aid of photos, current tables, charts, figures and other graphic illustrations, Barnes provides some answers to these questions.

Against the backdrop of a brief geographical description and a detailed historical account, Barnes presents an incisive overview of this country. Gabon, one of Africa's small but mineral rich states, is located astride the equator on the Atlantic coast. With a landmass of 267,537 square km, it is bounded on the east by Congo and on the north by Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. With a contested population figure of about 1,5 million, Gabon has vast mineral reserves of oil, iron ore, manganese and uranium. This largely explains why the French and Americans have great interest in that country.

After years of inter-ethnic strife among the Mpongwes, Orungus and later on the Fang who emigrated from Cameroon and elsewhere in the south, Gabon finally fell under French colonial tutelage. At the celebrated Berlin Congress of 1884, France which intensified its search for colonies after its defeat at the Franco-Prussian war incorporated Gabon into its African empire. In 1910 it became a part of the French equatorial federation with headquarters in Brazzaville, Congo.

Gabon attained independence in 1960 under the leadership of Leon Mba amidst political turmoil and dissension. In 1964, military officers attempted to overthrow Lean Mba but French intervened and salvaged his regime. On Mba's death in 1967, his former chief of Cabinet Albert Bernard Bongo took over and has since ruled the country using the carrot and stick. Blending benign facets of an enlighten despot and the ruthless tyrannical tactics of crushing opponents, Bongo has ruled this state for over two decades.

Barnes contends that the Babongo or Pygmies are widely acknowledged to be the first Gabonese. However, the Bantus later emigrated to the region probably due to climatic conditions and the fall of the great empires. He argues that owing to conflicting and fragmentary evidence, it is difficult to evaluate the significance of Gabon's precolonial era on the evolution of contemporary Gabon. A pertinent issue he raises is the degree to which Africans contributed to the obnoxious slave trade. Barnes contends that they were active though in some cases reluctant participants.

Gabon is graphically depicted as a dependent neocolony *par excellence*. While tactfully avoiding the crude jargon which sometimes characterizes neo-Marxists analysis, Barnes nonetheless does justice to the subject through logical arguments and statistical evidence. He submits that Gabon's accession to independence was accompanied by agreements which reinforced its economic dependence.

*Overall, Gabon's economy developed in direct proportion to the French interests in its natural resources producing an economy that relied until the 1970s almost exclusively on France for capital investments and markets.*

Like most emerging states, Gabon is a major food importer with a weak infrastructure and transportation network. Foreign exchange is earned from the export of petroleum, wood, manganese and uranium. However, manufacturing is at the building stage and represents approximately 7% of the GNP. The 1980s witnessed a sharp decline in exports and an increase in imports. Although efforts are being made to diversify the economy, France remains the main trading partner with a domineering influence in all sectors. Although Gabon has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, the poor public health system is another major stumbling block to national development.

*Gabon: Beyond the Colonial Legacy* asserts that the society is a complex entity where ethnic tensions sometimes jeopardize the quest for nationhood. With nearly fifty ethnic groups that fall into eight linguistic families: Myene, Kota, Duma, Tshogho, Mbete, Punu-Eshira and Teke, conflicts abound. The largest group, the Fangs evoke the suspicions and even the hostility of the others. There is the apprehension that they have ambitions of dominating national institutions.

Colonialism and the partitioning of Africa compounded the Gabonese problem. The power and authority of traditional institutions declined and new value systems based on education and money were introduced. Ethnic groups like the Bateke and Batoka were separated by artificial boundaries. Today Batekes can be found in both Congo and Gabon while the Fang straddle Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon.

After a period of contest between Catholics and Protestants, the former emerged as victors and Gabon has a large number of Catholics.

*Despite their attachment to Catholicism, many Gabonese continue to engage in rituals and practices based on traditions of animism that vary from forms of ancestor worship to secret male societies whose members believe in their power to transform themselves into lions and leopards.*

Although westernization holds sway in the region, many Gabonese still believe and practice sorcery.

An admirable trait of this book is the incisive analysis based on the history, politics and sociology of Gabon. His critical assessment of why Bongo was selected as a successor as well as the *raison d'être* for French intervention after the 1964 military coup are eloquent examples of the authors competence. Although Barnes is objective and cautious, he is occasionally blunt and frank. He claims that Gabon's quest for stability has been at the high

price of human rights pulverization, citing arrests and deportation arising from mild criticisms as being commonplace.

*The regime's congenial public face conceals a system of power and privilege that has maintained itself through intimidation and, possibly murder and assassination.*

The book cautiously predicts a bright future for Gabonese suggesting that pluralism and democratization are crucial components for success. Barnes concludes that the future of the Gabonese state is partly in the hands of France, the United States and the international monetary community. According to him, Gabonese authoritarian system survived because the outward signs of stability and order pleased those who rate their investments higher than political and economic justice. If the Gabonese fail in their efforts to implement a multiparty democracy, the fault will not be solely theirs.

Even if certain facts in the book are outdated, owing to the fast pace of events in Gabon, these do invalidate the fact that this is a splendid book. The historical account on the emergence of modern day Gabon is just superb. Using primary and secondary sources, Barnes provides an indepth history of Gabon. The socio-political analysis too is excellent. With the aid of facts, illustrations and corroborative evidence, the reader is introduced to all facets of Gabonese life.

More than anything else, the book is a profile of this rich central African state which has been the victim of loot and plunder by imperial overlords and today is still under the yoke of neocolonialists. Barnes has written a brief but leading text with a plethora and wealth of information on Gabon in a trenchant, persuasive and readable form. He deserves commendation for an outstanding job.