

chapter by chapter, one has soon grasped Connah's interpretation of the process of state formation so that the final chapter on the "common denominators" offers few surprises. Indeed, what is particularly striking is that, aside from a somewhat backhanded acknowledgment of the "important idea of heterarchy"—a concept that Connah in the end dismisses as based on "a lack of evidence for hierarchy rather than on the presence of positive evidence for heterarchy" (353)—the author's conclusions, and indeed much of the wording with which they are expressed, are virtually unchanged from the first edition.

According to Connah, control of highly productive land within the context of increasing population pressures was the "crucial common factor underlying the emergence of African elites" (351). Added to this basic ingredient was external long-distance trade, an "intensifier" of social changes that had begun with control of limited resources, such as copper, salt, iron, and ivory, which already circulated in "extensive *internal* trading networks" (350, emphasis in original). A further important ingredient was "religious ideology" that "legitimized and reinforced" the social hierarchy (352). Connah himself bemoans this "somewhat mechanistic" explanation for the origins of social complexity with a *cri de coeur* that "surely the reality is more complex than that" (353)—which itself is followed by a surprising suggestion that perhaps Jared Diamond has the best explanation in *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Vintage, 1998).

In summary, it is remarkable that a single author is still capable of mastering such a mass of archaeological evidence on African civilizations; one suspects that nobody will be in any hurry to follow in Graham Connah's distinguished footsteps. However, one cannot entirely escape the impression that this book, with its "mechanistic" approach to state formation and its emphasis on data rather than theory and method, is a product of a bygone era, though that is not necessarily a bad thing.

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## **HISTORY**

**Kathleen R. Smythe. *Africa's Past, Our Future*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xvii + 227 pp. Suggestions for further readings. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. \$30.00. Paper. \$29.99. E-Book. ISBN: 978-0253016553.

"African history is in a unique position to make significant contributions to a new view of humans' place in the world" (3), writes Kathleen Smythe in *Africa's Past, Our Future*. This book is an innovative, important, and courageous addition to African and world history scholarship. Most of *Africa's Past* is

dedicated to African history prior to the arrival of colonialism as well as to the concepts and ideas found in this history that could and should be applied to modern world problems. This is a paradigm-changer, since much of scholarship on Africa implies, sometimes subtly, that there is a need for advice from outside to guide this continent toward “progress.” Smythe contends that the opposite is true. For example, she cites the ability of African peoples to live in relative peace for long historical periods, without a state apparatus, as a major and instructive contribution from Africa to world history.

*Africa's Past* is a much-needed text for teaching African history. Smythe not only provides an excellent survey of the latest research on Africa's past, she also presents a concise and clear argument as to why this history is relevant today. The text is divided into three sections: “The Longue Duree”; “African Institutions in the Middle Time Frame”; and “Recent History and Politics.” The first section begins with the evidence for human origins in Africa. Smythe then describes the “Grandmother Hypothesis,” which proposes that the largest part of modern human DNA came from a family unit of a healthy grandmother beyond child-bearing, her children, and grandchildren. Smythe uses the earliest African history to show the fallacy of assuming that Western social and political institutions are “natural” to all humans or biologically determined. In the next chapters on African subsistence strategies, she criticizes popular books like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that ignore the significant early African agricultural innovations—including the first domestication of cattle—in their analysis of key contributions to the creation of the modern world. To innovate new agricultural technologies and settle the entire continent, Africans from early times until the modern era maintained a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. In a part of the world where rain could often be capricious, they learned to adapt to harsh and differing environments, understanding both the potential and the limitations—issues the entire world is grappling with currently.

The second section examines African ideologies and institutions such as heterarchy, matriliney, and “wealth in people.” Smythe uses the term “heterarchy” to describe most African communities prior to colonialism, in which there were multiple and overlapping centers of authority and status. The title of the next chapter is “Matriliney,” which is significant since the latest linguistic and genetic data indicate that matrilineages were among the first forms of social organization in large parts of Africa. But even more important, the ideology of matriliney tends to promote extensive social relations and widespread distribution of food and goods, which may have laid the basis for the final chapter in this section, “Forms of Economic Thought: Wealth in People and the Entrustment Economy.” Wealth in people, contends Smythe, is an African economic perspective based on the fact that Africa has always had a small population and a great deal of land. Land was plentiful and not owned privately, but collectively by clans and lineages. Labor was in short supply; therefore social relations were also economic ones. The entrustment economic system of the Luo is an example Smythe uses to show how Africans created social safety nets, since those participating in

entrustment institutions were responsible for mutual support in times of crisis. These relationships were based on manifold contingencies and were much more complex than just repaying a loan. Remnants of these affiliations are still found in modern Africa, as people, against all odds, survive hard times without government support.

In the third section Smythe clearly demonstrates that both colonialism and development theories and practices have been destructive to African societies and have suppressed African ingenuity. Probably the most poignant example is found in her description of programs run by the U.N., development groups, and modern African states to force African nomadic populations into a sedentary way of life. These nomadic peoples are animal herders and able to survive in semi-arid to arid regions because they are mobile. Their nomadism may well be a lesson in how humans can adapt and survive in harsh environments.

What I did find problematic in this book is the lack of acknowledgments or citations to the work of African scholars. A book dedicated to presenting African worldviews and their relevance to modern times needs at least to consider the voices of modern Africans and their scholarship. This is especially disappointing in the discussions of development issues, since both Dambisa Moyo's book, *Dead Aid* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010) and Paul Kagame's speeches and writings on the crippling effects of international aid on Africa are well known.

In conclusion, this book is courageous because it is a macrohistory of Africa and encourages the teaching of expansive African histories and African worldviews. Since African history is deep, diverse, and complex, generalizations are inevitable in a comprehensive African past written for undergraduates. This of course leaves the author open to critiques from "experts" in particular fields who don't totally agree with her summations. Smythe writes, "Africans do not have a better history than any other part of the world, they simply have an underappreciated history" (6). The only way for African history to become an essential part of modern historical discourse is through the writing and publishing of more histories like *Africa's Past*.

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**Eric Jennings. *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance*.** Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xv + 300 pp. Maps. Photographs. Index. \$27.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-107-69697-6.

In this new and excellent book, Eric Jennings further enhances our understanding of the topic—World War II in the French Empire—that was also the subject of his earlier important work, *Vichy in the Tropics* (Stanford