

## HISTORY

**John Iliffe. *Honour in African History*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xxiv + 404 pp. Photographs. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. \$28.99. Paper.

John Iliffe lays out his premise in the first sentence of his introduction: “The central argument of this book is that understanding African behaviour, in the past and in the present, must take account of changing notions of honour.” For the word *honour* he borrows the dictionary definition (“a [perceived?] right to respect”) but grants that it is “a contested category” (4), with meaning that changes not only over time, but also from one cultural setting to another. The author illustrates this by drawing on examples of “honour societies” ranging from Timbuktu to Cape Town and covering the many centuries for which written or orally derived evidence is available. In the process, considerable attention is paid to the notion among women, although, as Lonsdale points out, most of our information has a decidedly male optic.

The numerous cases Iliffe has chosen make for interesting and informative reading and clearly demonstrate that concepts of individual and group honor were and are no less prevalent among African societies than elsewhere in the world. Discussing changing concepts of honor—and dissociating one’s own from the process—involves, even more than usual, a very close attention to the context of the sources. Honor is one of those concepts that must be understood as operating at two levels, the ideal and the actual, with the amount of overlap left to observers to calculate. Almost by definition, even the actual has a large leaven of the idealized about it. For instance, the so-called flower wars of precontact Mesoamerica, to which Iliffe briefly refers, were, if they existed at all, nothing like the nonsanguinary frolics many of the sources depict, but rather *ex post facto* phenomena, even to some extent a modern anthropological confection. Iliffe must rely on oral sources such as praise poems, saga and epics, and chronicles designed to celebrate and foster elitist rule and, along with it, often a sense of noblesse oblige. This sometimes creates an impression that there was little difference between Kano and Camelot, at least as portrayed by the relevant sources.

In line with this approach, Iliffe regards honor as an aspect of “heroic cultures” and uses the word *heroic* quite frequently, virtually always favorably, without coming to grips with this quintessentially protean and idiosyncratic notion. He does not refer to such classic treatments of the concept—for it is as much concept as reality—as Lord Raglan’s *Hero* or H. M. and N. K. Chadwick’s *The Growth of Literature*, both of which address notions of heroic behavior and demeanor in a wide range of Western European literature. Were the Spartans at Thermopylae, the French at Crécy or Agincourt, or the British at New Orleans, Balaklava, Maiwand, or Ypres heroes or just victims? Were Śivaji

or Ivan Mazepa or George Washington—national heroes all—really less than heroic after all because they chose to retreat more often than to fight? Who is more heroic: a Zulu *induna*, a Hausa warrior, or an unremarked struggling but pertinacious single parent?

The numerous case studies may be seen as preamble to, or even as pre-text for, Iliffe's final chapter, "To Live with Dignity," which explores—and laments—the state of so many African societies today. His discussion of the contemporary African "condition" is fairly predictable; where it gains gravitas is with his demonstration that the notion of dignity, which might be considered a subset, or at least one manifestation, of honor, has a long and distinguished record extending throughout the continent and readily transcending cultural, social, and doctrinal differences in the process. In short, it inheres in the human condition, or at least in certain depictions of that condition. Indeed, the shift from "honor" to "dignity" precisely when it becomes possible to study a larger proportion of the population almost suggests that the change could be applied to the preceding discussions, not least because it is clearest here that honor (and/or dignity) is closely related to personal sacrifice.

David Henige  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
Madison, Wisconsin

**James C. McCann. *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000*.** Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xiii + 288 pp. Photographs. Maps. Illustrations. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. \$27.95. Cloth.

With a captivating title, *Maize and Grace*, James McCann considers the ambiguities of African development through a handful of creatively researched maize stories that demonstrate his well-honed investigatory and interpretative skills as a distinguished Africanist environmental historian. From an informed use of oral tradition, little-used agronomic research records, statistical analysis, and artistic and photographic evidence—shared through almost forty illustrations—McCann reveals how an environmental history of maize in Africa illustrates both the triumphs and tripwires of development science and politics.

The richly documented stories of maize as both blessing and misfortune might encourage a healthy measure of historically grounded humility among current "neo-green revolutionary" campaigns. But the central theme of *Maize and Grace* suggests otherwise. Contemporary and high-profile maize research and extension embody the modern agricultural strategy of transforming rather than adapting to the environment and thereby write one more chapter in the historical evolution of maize from local variation, adaptation, and flexibility to homogenization.

This defining feature in the history of maize in Africa—the trend from