

## REVIEWS

### A STATE-OF-THE-ART SURVEY OF HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON AFRICA

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*Africans: The History of a Continent*. Second Edition. By JOHN ILIFFE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiii + 365. £40 (ISBN 978-0-521-86438-1); £14.99, paperback (ISBN 978-0-521-68297-8).

KEY WORDS: Historiography.

There can be few readers of this journal who are not familiar with John Iliffe's *Africans: The History of a Continent*. Appearing in 1995, it rapidly established itself as the most authoritative single-volume history of Africa, offering a bold and compelling synthesis of the continent's past. I would guess – although I have no way of knowing this beyond casual exchanges with academic colleagues, as well as the evidence of my own well-thumbed copy – that it is the most widely used textbook for African history in the English-speaking world. Now, 14 years after its first publication, we have a revised edition, produced by Cambridge University Press in a new, and I think more attractive, format. In light of the first edition's great success, it was unlikely that Iliffe would offer a radically different text this time around, and he has not done so. As indicated in a new preface, only 2 of the 12 original chapters, those on prehistory and on the Atlantic slave trade, have been extensively revised (although these retain their established structure and overall argument). The main change is the addition of a new final chapter entitled 'In the time of AIDS' that extends the narrative beyond the closing point of the first edition, the South African elections of 1994, to events of 2006. Yet even Iliffe's minor alterations and bibliographical updates make for fascinating reading. Given the importance of this book as a state-of-the-art survey of historical scholarship on Africa, these changes point to how the field has been evolving over the past decade. Its appearance provides an opportunity to reflect upon these developments.

*Africans*, as is well known, takes as its overriding theme the population history of the continent. Some reviewers of the first edition took issue with the use of such a framework for understanding the entirety of the African past. In a review article for this journal, Thomas Spear, while otherwise praising the work's dazzling scholarship, concluded that, however much Iliffe 'sees Africa's population history as a function of Africa's sparse soils, erratic rainfall and the social strategies Africans adopted to exploit these, his argument often veers towards neo-Malthusian determinism in which population itself becomes the critical independent variable'.<sup>1</sup> I do not wish to rehearse these debates here, beyond making the point that while to some extent I share Spear's concern over the sometimes implicit environmental and demographic determinism, I do not feel that this detracts in any serious way from the utility of the work as a *textbook*. Textbooks need big ideas, or even one big idea, if they are not to become soulless

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Spear, 'Review article: Africa's Population history', *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), 479–85, 484.

regurgitations of received themes and narratives. Yet, having just done what very few of the key target audience of this book will ever do, that is, to read it from cover to cover, I am struck by how unobtrusive and subtle the 'population history' theme is. Dipping into it here and there, as most undergraduates will do – to prepare for a seminar or to write an essay on, say, the spread of Islam, medieval Ethiopia, the Atlantic slave trade, resistance to and negotiation with colonial conquerors, or the impact of education and literacy in the twentieth century – the population dynamic is actually rather easy to miss, often appearing in a discrete section at the end of a chapter under a heading such as 'Environment and demography' (Chapter 9, on colonial conquest) or 'Health and demography' (Chapter 10, on colonialism). One may or may not agree with Iliffe's opening assertion that the 'modern histories of all Third World countries need to be rewritten around demographic growth' (p. 2). But he employs demographic growth as a broad, inclusive framework rather than a rigid analytical straitjacket. *Africans*, in other words, works, as the very best textbooks do, on a number of levels.

So, what is new about this second edition? Given recent and dramatic developments in palaeoanthropology, it is unsurprising that Iliffe's first substantial chapter, on human evolution and the emergence of food production in Africa, is one of the two to be extensively revised. The discovery in 2001 on the shores of Lake Chad of the skull of the first known hominin, *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, has at a stroke pushed back the date of the separation of human ancestors from those of chimpanzees some 2 million years, to over 6 million years ago. Skeletal finds, together with genetic data from existing populations, are also rapidly reshaping our understanding of subsequent human evolution as well as debates over the 'Out of Africa' thesis of the spread of mankind's immediate ancestor, *Homo erectus* (or *ergaster*). This is a fast-moving field, and it is notable that famous sites of earlier discoveries, Olduvai in Tanzania and Koobi Fora in Kenya, are now absent from the accompanying map. Mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome data are also contributing to the study of the emergence of Africa's four main language families, which can now be seen to coincide to some extent with genetic differences. In the first edition, this was examined in a section entitled 'Race and Language', but in another emblematic change Iliffe has chosen to excise the problematic term 'race'. It is indicative of the sensitivity and skill with which he charts a course through key issues, based on complex and often contradictory evidence.

Our understanding of subsequent social and economic differentiation in Africa, although subject to less dramatic rethinking than that of human evolution, also continues to advance with new archaeological discoveries and techniques. Again, fieldwork around Lake Chad has been important. Iliffe reports the recent discovery of an 8,000-year-old canoe, 8 metres long, the world's second-oldest boat and further evidence of the peopling of the Sahara region during the wet Holocene period from 12,000 to 7,500 years ago. He goes on to survey the latest research findings on the emergence of pastoralist and agricultural communities before turning, in Chapter 3, to those on metallurgy and the development of settled life in the Nile Valley and elsewhere. Subtle but important revisions here include a new interpretation of the Pharaoh Akhenaten's monotheism, updated material on the Garamantes of the Fezzan and the current conclusion, after years of speculation, that metallurgical technology was unlikely to have been transmitted from Carthage south across the Sahara. Such fine-tuning continues to characterize Chapter 4 on Christianity and Islam and the two chapters on 'colonizing society' in western and in eastern and southern Africa, respectively. Here, Iliffe demonstrates as sure a touch with a widening range of historical

sources as he does with the archaeological literature, weaving in groundbreaking new work such as that by McIntosh on the Middle Niger and Vansina on early Angola.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 8 on the Atlantic slave trade is the other that has been subject to more extensive updating in the light of recent research. This chapter is, I think, one of the best in the book: it is impossible to imagine a better thirty-page survey to which to point undergraduates as they begin to grapple with this most complex of subjects. A crucial new source is Eltis *et al.*, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, detailing the 27,233 recorded slaving voyages between 1519 and 1867, some 70 per cent of the total.<sup>3</sup> The data base, together with a sequence of interpretive journal articles, has served to place a greater stamp of authority on the figures for slave exports, Iliffe noting that these are now 'reasonably clear' (p. 141). Despite his prediction in the first edition that on-going research may reveal that up to 13 million slaves were removed from Africa, the numbers have actually been revised slightly downwards to 11,061,800, with further fine-tuning regarding the shifting magnitude of removals over time, from region to region, destination in the Americas and mortality figures. Account is also taken of new directions in research beyond the quantitative volume and structure of the trade: on ship-board revolts and other manifestations of slave resistance, on the mobilization of spiritual resources by both victims and predators, and on the impact of American food crops.

The following two chapters on regional diversity in the nineteenth century and on colonial conquest – both succinct, lucid surveys of a mass of diverse material – have been subject only to very light revision. So too has Chapter 10 on the colonial period, 1918–50 – which is somewhat striking given the great amount of research published in the last ten years on twentieth-century Africa. This does begin to feature more prominently, however, in the next chapter on the era of independence, now reconfigured to cover the period 1950 to 1980, the 'years of optimism'. The periodization here gives pause for thought. In his own recent textbook on modern African history, Frederick Cooper takes 1940 as his starting point, challenging the conventional date of 1960 as marking Africa's era of renewed sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> Iliffe retains 1950, but goes on to identify the 1970s as the real watershed in recent African history. The decade can clearly be seen as a negative turning-point in terms of political culture and economic development, but in a more optimistic light with regard to demographic change. Here Iliffe brings his central theme to the foreground, demonstrating that the continent's extraordinary rate of population growth since mid-century – unprecedented in world history – had by about 1980 reached what appears to be its peak. In 1979, Kenya experienced an annual growth rate of 4.1 per cent: the highest ever recorded. The widespread levelling off and projected decline of fertility rates, tragically exacerbated in some regions by the impact of the AIDS epidemic, provides the backdrop for the book's closing chapter.

How have Africans fared 'in the time of AIDS'? Iliffe, as throughout, takes a measured view of the evidence, judging that the continent at the start of the

<sup>2</sup> Roderick J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger: The Island of Gold* (Oxford, 1998); Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> D. Eltis, S. H. Behrendt, D. Richardson and H. S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002).

twenty-first century is experiencing 'both crisis and renewal' (p. 288). Reasons for optimism, such as the reintegration of post-apartheid South Africa into the mainstream of African history (the triumphant event with which the first edition ended), have to be set against the on-going cycle of violence that spun out from the 1994 Rwandan genocide to engulf the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>5</sup> Yet the author does allow himself a rare bit of elbow-room to take firm issue with the assessment that, by the end of the 1990s, the democratization movements of the previous decade had failed.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent political developments have shown this to be far from clear. In terms of conflict resolution, too, he highlights the end of long-running civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan, and the decline of jihadist violence and attendant counter-insurgency in Algeria. With regard to the AIDS crisis itself, there is also room for very guarded optimism – in contrast to the bleak assessment of the first edition, written at the very darkest moment of the epidemic in the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> By 2005, some 25 million Africans were living with HIV/AIDS, some 13 million had died from it, and four of the worst affected countries, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, were suffering from absolute population decline. Yet in the light of the detection of declining infection rates and of the increasing availability of antiretroviral drugs – and here Iliffe draws on web-based evidence produced as late as December 2006 – there is some reason to believe that a corner has begun to be turned.

Reading this seminal work afresh has made me appreciate just what an extraordinary achievement it really is. Historians whose expertise lie in particular regions and/or with particular themes will always quibble with even the most persuasive generalist surveys, whether those quibbles are about analytical balance, about what gets left in and what gets left out, or about the accuracy of detail. Questions can certainly be raised about some of Iliffe's choices here. Is the retention of the (now) penultimate chapter on the modern history of South Africa justified, or does it contribute to the possibly misleading perception of South African exceptionalism? Is South Africa more peculiar than, say, Ethiopia, or Egypt? The book is about a continent, as its sub-title says, but should there not be more about historical links with the African diaspora? There is little or no engagement with shifting historiographical debates, with the conflicting interpretations from which the synthesis has emerged; and so on. But Iliffe's mastery of his material across time and space is utterly secure. Reading the sections on that part of the continent that my own research is focused on, the states of the Akan forest and the Gold Coast (pp. 147–8 and 155), I was struck by how pitch-perfect they were as condensed summaries of hugely complex historical processes. I have little doubt that this holds true across the board, and will continue to peddle to students the book's clear-headed analytical insights and evocative, pithy examples. John Iliffe's quite extraordinary publication output shows no sign of slowing down. We can only hope that both he and the entire field of African history continue to be robust

<sup>5</sup> Since publication, the conflict in DR Congo has been judged to have accounted for the highest loss of life of any war, not just in Africa, as indicated by Iliffe (p. 309), but in the world since 1945.

<sup>6</sup> J.-F. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou, *The Criminalization of the African State* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> This material is based largely on Iliffe's own, intervening, monograph on the topic, *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History* (Oxford, 2006).

enough to produce a third edition of this outstanding textbook in another twelve years.

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## INEQUALITY AND THE CAUSES OF POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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*Class, Race and Inequality in South Africa.* By JEREMY SEEKINGS and NICOLI NATRASS. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. Pp. x+446. \$60 (ISBN 978-030-010-8927).

*A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002.* By SAMPIE TERREBLANCHE. Pietermaritzburg and Sandton: University of Natal Press and KMM Review Press, 2002. Pp. xvi+527. £37.50 (ISBN 978-1869-140-229).

KEY WORDS: South Africa, apartheid, class, economic, inequality, poverty, social.

Both books under review are large tomes that assess inequality and the causes of poverty in South Africa from a vantage point several years into South Africa's post-apartheid development. While they concur on the main points of analysis, they adopt different methodologies and have different audiences as their focus.

Terreblanche insists that it is impossible to understand issues of inequality and poverty without looking at South African history or without understanding how power has been wielded within that history. No less than one-third of his book is taken up with a pre-1948 historical narrative. He also provides a detailed assessment of the political transition of 1990–4 and key elements of macro-economic policy since that date. Terreblanche's summary is wide-ranging and, in general, accurate in its telling. His perspective emphasizes power politics over economic structures and imposes itself morally as an object lesson. For instance, he provides considerable discussion of the pathetic role of business in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and displays notable disdain towards those leading lives of luxury, blind to the historical foundations on which these structures rest. Terreblanche follows an established trend in South African history; he is not the first to conclude that the forecast is gloomy unless this path is abandoned.

By contrast with a writer such as Patrick Bond, Terreblanche sees South Africa's current problems not so much in terms of servitude to the interests of the international financial institutions such as the World Bank as of what he calls the 'Anglo-Americanisation' of the economy, the dominance at the commanding heights of economic power of the financial sector and its worship of shareholder value, with a corresponding lack of interest in developmental ideas that might break down South Africa's historic dualism. For this reason, Terreblanche revisits the transition years from the point of view of economic policy and the powerful role of the corporations. He argues that a system was put in place, even before 1990, establishing structures that effectively keep existing patterns of inequality in place. 'Anglo-Americanisation' he sees as embedded in deeply entrenched prejudices about race and class.

In complementary vein, Seekings and Natrass point out that 'overall levels of inequality changed little during the second half of the twentieth century' (p. 303).