

REVIEWS

A CENTURY OF PARADOXES

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Africa and the Africans in the Nineteenth Century: A Turbulent History.

By CATHERINE COQUERY-VIDROVITCH. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009.

Pp. xix + 312. \$88.95, hardback (ISBN 978-0-7656-1698-8); \$34.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-7656-1697-5).

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For forty years Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch has been a force in African studies. Her book on the concessionary companies of Congo-Brazzaville has no peer in its empirical detail and analytic rigor of this aspect of early colonial rule. She has opened new perspectives on social history, trade, women, urban history, and many other themes. She has nurtured individuals and institutions in both France and Africa, and tended assiduously to students in North America as well as West Africa and Europe. Everywhere she has worked, she has animated African studies both by the range and rigor of her writings and by the energy and warmth of her personal relationships.

This volume, the most recent of her many contributions, is structured around broad themes and processes that marked the crucial nineteenth century in African history. It privileges the view from within: ‘what was felt to be most important [to Africans] were the political and religious processes ... internal to African societies’ (p. ix). It is replete with examples of African vitality, innovation, and courage in meeting multiple challenges—ecological challenges, the challenges of foreign intrusion, as well as internal transformations in the construction of cities, in gender relations, in trade methods, and in religious revolutions and innovations within both Islam and Christianity. The depth of religious changes and the range of reconstructed identities to result from both movement and new power configurations emerge as two of the strengths of this presentation, as well as dominant themes of the century. Through it all the presentation remains very sensitive to ecological and demographic catastrophes—epizootics, epidemics, drought, and famine; but it places these ruptures as parts of the broader unfolding of ongoing historical themes.

The nineteenth century in Africa was a century of paradoxes. While it saw the transition from the height of the Atlantic slave trade to ‘abolition’, it was also ‘the time of the slave trade’s greatest expansion’ within Africa (p. 186) as social units were redefined and social hierarchies extended, so that ‘on the eve of colonization, nearly one in two Africans was a slave’ (p. 191). Trade too held paradoxes. While the external terms of trade moved in ways that greatly favored Africans, competition among Europeans (both for materials and markets) was a major factor in the eventual move towards colonialism. And despite the flourishing external trade, internal trade flourished even more in certain parts of the continent; for example, while St. Louis (a major trade entrepôt at the mouth of the Senegal River) had a little over 10,000 inhabitants in 1800–40, several of the desert commercial centers had 55–60,000 members.

Some of the most effective sections are on religion and politics, contrasting ‘political Islam’ to ‘military Islam’, and ‘revolutionary Islam’ to ‘conquering Islam’. Sections on specific Muslim leaders bring the *jihads* of nineteenth-century

West Africa alive in a vivid fashion; the continuation of this theme highlights leaders in East and north-east Africa. Such cross-regional comparisons effectively provide coherence to the work, although more might have been made of the sophisticated structural foundations provided by Islamic institutions for commercial expansion, in both internal networks and external alliances. Consideration of the role of religion is not limited to Islam, however. Early Protestant and Catholic presence is discussed in Sierra Leone, Abeokuta, Buganda, Basutoland and elsewhere, and early Christian ties to colonialism are made evident in an observation by Harry Johnstone, a renowned British colonial administrator: 'Each mission station is an essay in colonialism' (p. 241). Furthermore, one of the innovations of this work is its stress on the role of 'animist' religions in organizing both resistance and the expansion of certain West African polities (Asante and Dahomey, in particular).

Those examples may be well known for certain regions, but what is remarkable is the way this volume introduces different perspectives for all regions. For example, this volume provides full consideration to North Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia. It also addresses controversies in the discipline. For example, the full summary of the debates on the rise of the Zulu in South Africa serves as an effective introduction to many other themes of South African history. Coquery-Vidrovitch's deconstruction of the misrepresentation of the Maasai as 'traditional' people, when in fact their nineteenth-century history was both a product of and an example of massive ecological change and great social dynamics. And her discussions of internal innovations (the longest chapter by far), is rich with example and detail. Of course, a volume such as this cannot do justice to every topic, to every corner of the continent, or to every significant theme. It deals with only one century – though a very significant one, from many angles. It often overlooks structural aspects in favor of individual actions: it would benefit greatly from supplementary lectures, readings, discussions – as would any book of this nature. And it privileges state actors, institutions, and effects at the expense of providing insight to the dynamics of deeper social structures, cultural expressions, and individuals outside state paradigms (such as slaves, or workers in the mines, or economic migrants). But those drawbacks are a product of the genre: the dominant feature of this work (and its most magnificent achievement) is the way this single volume covers the continent in a balanced manner, presents complicated themes clearly, and illuminates how historical understanding is a construction formed of debate, critique, and ongoing research. In a brisk and concise style, this volume both provides clear synopses of regional dynamics and illuminates the comparisons and shared conditions across regions. It is gracefully written, and the translation from French is fluid, if not lyrical. In short this work, on a turbulent century across the continent, provides a fitting capstone to an extremely productive career.

Smith College

DAVID NEWBURY

IMPERIAL 'HEROES'

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Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa. By EDWARD BERENSON. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 360. \$29.95, hardback (ISBN 978-0-520-23427-7).

KEY WORDS: Exploration/travel, imperialism, memory.

Edward Berenson, Professor of History at New York University, comes to Africa from the European past and French Studies in particular. Leaving aside the