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 pretext 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

local variation to homogenization—did not just happen by accident. As McCann argues in his examination of the "world ecology of maize" and the complex, coevolutionary relationships of people and maize, plant breeding embodies political as well as agronomic choices; only some of these express the preferences of small farmers. This political theme is woven throughout the stories and offers a significant opportunity for the application of historical analysis to contemporary development initiatives. For example, since seed saving has historically been an important farmer-centered strategy adapted to specific local conditions, McCann justifiably asks whether the well-funded public and corporate initiatives to replace popular varieties of Quality Protein Maize by hybrids that farmers will not be able to save and share represent "a sustainable change or a temporary blip" (5).

The fascinating historical geography of maize provided in chapter 2 includes an imaginative description of the ways in which "local aesthetic expression" and wonderfully diverse place-based names of maize were replaced by the numbers and initials of trials and research stations. Continuing his skillful use of oral tradition, McCann uses the stories of maize among the Asante and the Yoruba to illustrate the twin themes of "the agroecology of West African political history" and "the Africanization of maize" that occurred first in West Africa (43). Both chapters 2 and 3 contribute to the building of a historically grounded West African political ecology and to critical analyses of the relationships among development and biodiversity.

The comparative historical ecology of maize in northern Italy and in Ethiopia further broadens our perspective by showing how maize "throws into sharp relief some fundamental historical truths about the social and economic change in agrarian systems" (61). Documenting the spread of maize in northern Italy offers clear evidence of insights made possible by blending solid historiography with an appreciation of agronomic and farming systems knowledge. Similarly, McCann's now well-known story of maize and malaria later in the book testifies to both excellent historical detective skills and to the analytical contribution of a truly multidisciplinary team that encouraged sensitivity to the unintended consequences of economic development and environmental change, as well as the effects of new diseases.

Based on a solid understanding of the historical political ecology of maize, McCann explores the international political economy of maize through three interrelated themes. Looking at "how Africa's maize turned white" allows him to examine the political economy of maize and the process of industrialization (especially mining). The "now obscure episode" of the rapid spread of American rust throughout Africa in the early 1950s offers an opportunity for him to consider the "nature of science, political ecology, and the globalization of power" (121). Finally, the story of SR-52 in southern Africa returns to the politics of agronomic research with a refreshing and cautious perspective on the ways in which SR-52, "a miracle of sorts[,] ... transformed African landscapes, racial pol-

https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2006.0057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

itics, and diets... [and has become]... a leitmotif for the history of African maize in the second half of the twentieth century" (140–41).

Perhaps a more explicit and detailed discussion of critical conceptual themes would have strengthened McCann's recommendations for development policymakers and practitioners and for those deeply concerned about the introduction of genetically engineered maize. This next step will be of paramount importance to African development. For, as McCann concludes, "politics and ideology, rather than science or African farmers' choice, will probably determine whether genetically modified crops are to be a feature of Africa's agricultural landscapes" (208). If maize is to become a force for African democratization, an engine of economic growth, and Africa's "saving grace" through its genetic diversity, then we must build from these rich stories to fashion ways in which maize, in all its genetic diversity, again achieves "full expression in the lives, economies and soils of modern Africa" (215).

James Bingen
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

Jan Vansina. *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. xiv + 325 pp. Maps. Tables. Figure. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. $45.00. Cloth.

Jan Vansina's most recent monograph presents the first regional history of West Central African societies (the Herero, Lunda, and Ovimbundu, inter alia) before their entrance into the wider Atlantic world. Vansina musters an impressive variety of sources—linguistic, archaeological, ethnographic, biological, written, and oral—to uncover how these societies were born from largely independent autochthonous forager communities through the development of institutions of governance. Cultural innovation and borrowing restricted the paths of historical change in West Central African societies to three regional variants. Briefly, societies in the drier southern region valued cattle, organizing their social, political, and economic lives to facilitate the keeping of large herds. Simultaneously, people in middle Angola recognized leaders for their skills in arbitration and the management of fertility. These societies focused on sacralized leaders and the spectacle of the court, whose elaborate title system provided even modest local notables a means of participation in courtly life. Finally, in the Kalahari Sands region to the east, the environment required settlement in small villages along the fertile riverbanks. Collective ideas about society as an interplay of statuses, roles, and individual distinction led to a variety of local elaborations on a shared institutional foundation of villages, vicinages (collectivities of villages), and sodalities based on age and gender.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 describes the emergence of