

bless the king during the daily Divine Liturgy. When the edict requiring all Ethiopians to convert to Roman Catholicism was revoked, Walata Petros was seen as a heroine in her own time. Belcher also makes a convincing argument about the important roles played by noblewomen at this moment in Ethiopian history, and the significance of female agency in general.

A unique aspect of this account—and one that distinguishes it from other *gadla*—concerns Walata Petros's relationship with another nun named Eheta Krestos. Belcher concludes that for over twenty-five years, as Walata Petros was engaged in establishing a number of religious communities to accommodate her growing group of followers, she and Eheta Krestos “became lifelong companions, a holy and celibate couple . . . involved in a lifelong partnership of deep romantic friendship” (39). Belcher introduces this relationship between the two nuns as “the earliest anecdote we know of in which African women express desire for other women” (xxxii). The case she makes is measured, but it could have benefited, nevertheless, from even a brief mention of the large body of research and writing on the subject of spiritual friendship in the medieval and early Renaissance. Such relationships were not as unique as this volume suggests.

This one omission, however, does not in any way detract from the value of this volume, or the significance of Belcher and Kleiner's contribution in making widely available this important hagiobiography of an exceptional female leader, written “in an African language by Africans about Africans” (1).

A final thought: a high compliment is due to Princeton University Press for publishing such a magnificent volume, on quality paper with maps, excellent four-color reproductions, and real footnotes, and for offering it at a most reasonable price.

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Herman J. Cohen. *The Mind of the African Strongman: Conversations with Dictators, Statesmen, and Father Figures*. Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2015. xiii + 205 pp. Index. \$24.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780986435300.

The “Big Men” of African politics are a fascinating subject. After all, few leaders are so powerful and uncontested in their political decision-making, and few have failed so miserably. More than a half-century after the majority of African nations gained their independence, there is still too little sustainable economic development on the continent. Political conflicts continue to be explosive, corruption and clientelism are rife, and the rule of the law is overwhelmingly deficient. These outcomes stand in stark contrast to the

profound optimism that was so widespread in many freshly decolonized nations. In the early days of independence, the political class in most countries believed that strong governments were needed to meet the tremendous challenges ahead. What followed was a concentration of political authority and the emergence of leaders facing few effective constraints in their handling of domestic affairs. How these strongmen reason, how they perceive themselves and their fellow citizens, and how they explain or justify their decisions are intriguing questions for anybody interested in African politics.

The Mind of the African Strongman analyzes the background, performance, and impact of several African heads of state. Cohen limits his exposition to leaders he personally encountered during a long Foreign Service career. This somewhat narrows the scope of the book, as influential presidents, such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, are not included. Each chapter opens with a brief historical sketch, providing the relevant context. Cohen then describes his dealings with African leaders, which range from entertaining trivia to eyewitness accounts of top-level decision-making. The chapters close with a personal assessment of the individuals' legacies. Individual chapters are grouped into thematic clusters. The first group focuses on the Francophone heads of state: Léopold Senghor (Senegal), Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire), and Albert-Bernard (later "Omar") Bongo (Gabon). The chapters in the second group consider presidents of former British colonies, specifically Daniel Arap-Moi (Kenya), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe). Two separate chapters are dedicated to the Congolese rulers Joseph-Desiré Mobutu and Laurent-Desiré Kabila. Each chapter of the fourth group addresses heads of state who emerged from the military, namely Ibrahim Babangida (Nigeria), Muammar Gaddafi (Libya), Mohamed Siad Barre (Somalia), and Jonas Savimbi (Angola). The fifth group consists of a single chapter on Liberia and the two leaders that contributed significantly to the disastrous developments there, Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor. Group six, also a single chapter, is dedicated to the two South African statesmen who irreversibly transformed their country and made it an exception on the continent, F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela. Cohen concludes his book with a summary of the insights drawn from his experiences with and personal observations of Africa's strongmen.

Cohen makes great effort to place the often atrocious transgressions of the individuals covered in their proper historical and social context. Nonetheless, controversial topics, such as Mobutu's disdain for his fellow citizens, Bongo's kleptocracy, or Gaddafi's delusional grandiosity, are addressed overtly. Moreover, he illuminates the realities of *realpolitik*, especially against the background of the Cold War. With disarming honesty, Cohen admits that certain issues, such as political repression and human rights violations, were not terribly important to U.S. foreign policy before the George H. W. Bush administration.

Herman Cohen had a long and accomplished diplomatic career, with appointment to several African nations and culminating in his service as

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the first Bush administration. Since his retirement from the U.S. Foreign Service, Cohen has continued to be involved with African affairs as a private consultant. Moreover, he is an engaging writer, and these accounts of his experiences with various African leaders are both informative and highly readable.

Overall, *The Mind of the African Strongman* would be fascinating for Africanists, historians of U.S. foreign policy in Africa, and anybody interested in learning about African affairs from a knowledgeable eyewitness who had privileged access to some of Africa's most influential leaders. Political scientists, psychologists, and decision researchers hoping to gain generalizable insights into the mindsets and choice processes of African strongmen may be less satisfied. After all, this is the work of a career diplomat, not an academic. Nevertheless, Cohen mentions some common themes that inform the thinking of most leaders he encountered. Examples include their paternalistic stance toward their fellow citizens as "children" in need of "guidance," the tendency to affirm their "greatness" with foreign policy initiatives, and their deeply rooted paranoia and suspicion toward their immediate surroundings. Scholars interested in a more general understanding of how African strongmen reason and make decisions may find these aspects of great relevance for their hypothesis development.

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