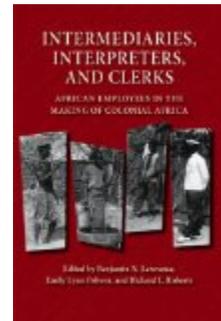


Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa.
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Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks

In the 1970s and 1980s, an edited volume focused entirely on African colonial intermediaries such as interpreters, translators, clerks, and secretaries would not have aroused much interest from historians of Africa because they were then preoccupied with elite African political figures, usually male, Pan-Africanist, nationalist and resistance heroes who had taken up arms against European colonizers and struggled for independence. Even with a clarion call in 1983 by Henri Brunschwig, a historian of French imperialism, imploring scholars to undertake empirical research on African interpreters, translators, and clerks who straddled the colonial divide in mediating between Europeans and Africans, it took another decade or so before historians of Africa began to consider such colonial intermediaries worthy of any attention.[1] Although a number of studies alluded to the import of their mediations in shaping relations between Europeans and Africans, however, monographs on colonial interpreters and similar interlocutors did not materialize from the growing interest of scholars.[2] David Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (2000), for example, despite profiling a number of influential interpreters from the Anne, Seck, Lo and Mbengue families concentrated on grand marabouts such as Saad Buh and Sidiyya Baba who brokered relations between the French authorities in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and African leaders and their constituencies in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone between 1880 and 1920.[3]

Against the above historiographical backdrop, *Inter-*

mediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks, edited by Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborn, and their Stanford-based guru Richard Roberts, is a well-timed and refreshing compilation that fills a lingering lacuna in historical literature on colonial Africa. By exploring a cross-section of African personnel employed at the lowest levels of the colonial administration, the volume shines the spotlight on previously marginalized local go-betweens—interpreters, translators, clerks, letter writers and “bush lawyers”—whose mediations shaped in varying degrees relations of power that evolved between Europeans and Africans from the early 1800s to the 1960s, the decade of African independence. Indeed, the volume makes an inestimable contribution to the social history of ordinary African employees of the colonial state as active historical agents in their own right rather than hapless colonized subjects who were at the mercy of omnipotent European officials.

An upshot of the symposium “Interpreters, Letter Writers, and Clerks: Mediating Law and Authority in Colonial Africa” convened at Stanford University, California, in May 2002, this eleven-chapter volume deals with a range of African intermediaries whose “wider roles ... in the making of modern Africa” illuminate not only their paradoxical position as “middle figures” but also the subtleties of colonial power relations (p. vii). Instead of covering the whole continent, however, as its subtitle “African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa” suggests, the volume in fact focuses only on sub-Saharan Africa. Considering that the symposium’s presentations were limited in geographic scope insofar

as there were no papers on North African and South African intermediaries, the editors' decision to concentrate on sub-Saharan Africa hardly comes as any surprise. Of course, African intermediaries were ubiquitous in encounters between Europeans and Africans throughout the continent during the colonial period. And some North African go-betweens, especially Algerian interpreters/translators, even traversed the Sahara Desert into the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria as reconnaissance agents and informants for French officials in the late nineteenth century, as Allan Christelow's study reveals.^[4] To offset the geographical imbalance of the symposium and provide a better coverage of sub-Saharan Africa in the volume, therefore, the editors solicited two contributions (not presented at the symposium) from Roger Levine and Thomas McClendon, who added chapters on intermediaries in South Africa.

The volume consists of two main parts followed by an afterword from emeritus professor Martin Klein, which recaps in a neatly woven epilogue the broad contours of the intriguing essays presented by a rich mix of scholars representing a broad range of interests in African history. In addition, an appendix at the end of the volume written by Dr. Saliou Mbaye, the former director of the National Archives of Senegal in Dakar, offers a brief but informative discussion of research and sources in the French colonial archives on Senegalese interpreters and translators who worked for the colonial administration in Senegal.

The first part of the volume, "The Formative Period of Colonial Rule, ca. 1800-1920," consists of five chapters that cover short interludes during the long century that witnessed the European presence along the coast of Africa transform into full-fledged occupation by the end of the nineteenth century. The second part of the volume, "The Maturing Phase of Colonial Rule, ca. 1920-1960," comprises six chapters that deal with the post-World War I period up to the 1960s, when most African countries gained independence. Five of the essays in the volume are on western Africa—Guinea (Conakry), Togo, Nigeria and French West Africa (two essays)—while the others cover Tanzania and Kenya (two essays). Completing the count are Ralph Austen's transnational essay featuring Mali and Cameroon and the essays by Levine and McClendon on South Africa mentioned above.

In a nuanced and insightful rendition, the introduction to the volume lays out a range of thought-provoking themes with which scholars from different disciplines have engaged during the last two decades or so. The

editors' discussion brings to center stage the intersection of knowledge and power in colonial situations, hegemonic relations between Africans and Europeans, translation and interpretation as processes of cross-cultural exchange, and gender, race, and class vis-à-vis colonial hierarchy and power relations. As one might expect in such compilations, however, it is debatable whether the treatment of the themes in some of the essays measures up to the standard set in the introduction. For example, although Emile Osborn's chapter on the local interpreter Boubou Penda and his French boss Ernest Noirot in French Guinea (Conakry) illustrates amply that women were subordinate to men who often abused them physically, other essays (not necessarily focused on gender issues) by Maurice Amutabi, Brett Shadle, Ruth Ginio, Jean-Herve Jezequel, Benjamin Lawrance, and Ralph Austen merely affirm what we already know about gender configurations in colonial Africa, that is, that men dominated the colonial space and European officials acquiesced in preserving African patriarchal hierarchies.

Despite the volume's subtitle, the protagonist of McClendon's chapter on South Africa in the mid nineteenth century, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, is a white British-born interpreter and colonial official, an anomaly in an otherwise well-documented and richly textured compilation. The editors' rationale for privileging Shepstone is unclear. To be sure, there were indigenous South African interpreters and translators—among them Sol Plaatje, who mediated in the courts of Kimberley in the 1890s and bridged the language gap between speakers of Setswana, English, and Afrikaans—whose history could have also enriched this volume.

At the same time, the volume includes some perceptive analyses and interpretations that deepen our understanding of the ambiguities that underpinned European colonial rule in Africa. Despite its omnipresence, the colonial state was fraught with weaknesses and contradictions that ordinary African employees often exploited in pursuit of their own interests. And in spite of their subordinate position in the colonial hierarchy, "African colonial employees were not simply lackeys of the colonial state" (p. 7). Rather, as the essays by Osborn, Austen, Amutabi, and Andreas Eckert, among others, reveal, they participated actively in the "domestic bargains of collaboration" that defined the hegemonic relations between African employees and European colonial authorities. For the day-to-day functions of European officials to bear fruit, therefore, colonial rule was punctuated by "the collaborative underpinning of the colonial adminis-

trator” (p. 9) whose power in his administrative unit depended largely on the support of African intermediaries and other local employees.

Although Austen’s essay on Kouh Moukouri and Amadou Hamphate Ba, who served as interpreters in the colonial administration of Cameroon and Mali, respectively, suggests that African clerks were preoccupied with “banal and generally petty bureaucratic chores” (p. 163), their intermediary position empowered them and was the basis of their influence in the local power structure, especially among Africans. Indeed as Eckert observes about interpreters in late colonial Tanzania, “Although they had no position of official authority, they had the power to influence things merely by their language skills” (p. 249). Because European administrators seldom interacted directly with ordinary Africans, they had to rely on African mediators to help them navigate the complex cultural landscape they administered. This notwithstanding, Boubou Penda’s personal friendship with his French boss Ernest Niorot, explored in Osborn’s chapter, was an exception to the rule, because interactions between Africans and Europeans for the most part were highly structured.

In sum, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks* provides a window through which we see how an assortment of African intermediaries and other ordinary employees of the colonial state start to grapple with the changing dynamics of power relations between Europeans and Africans over time as well as among Africans themselves in different colonial settings in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, some themes explored in the volume such as knowledge and power, hegemony, and cross-cultural translation and interpretation offer far more insight than other themes do, for example, gender, race, and class in colonial situations. Still, the creative use of archival materials, oral sources, and texts, as well as

the cross-disciplinary approach adopted by some of the authors, as evident in the chapters by Amutabi, Austen, Jezequel, Lawrance and Osborn, points to different trajectories in retrieving and reconstructing the lived experiences of hitherto excluded indigenous historical actors of colonial Africa. Finally, as far as readership is concerned the availability of this volume in a paperback edition will be most welcome for general readers. Independent researchers, specialists in African history, cross-disciplinary scholars, and graduate students will find the essays, notes at the end of each chapter, and the extensive bibliography extremely useful in investigating further the themes and topics the contributors explore. Graduate seminars in African history could benefit from drawing on chapters in this volume to explore the multiple roles and impact of different categories of African intermediaries during the colonial period.

Notes

[1]. Henri Brunschwig, *Noirs et blancs dans l’Afrique noire française, ou, Comment le colonisé devient colonisateur, 1870-1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983).

[2]. Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), on European missionaries and medicine in the former Belgian Congo, for instance, touched on the functions of middle figures as essential mediators between Europeans and Africans during the colonial period.

[3]. David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

[4]. Allan Christelow, “Algerian Interpreters and the French Colonial Adventure in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Maghreb Review* 10, nos. 4-6 (1985): 101-106.

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