H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Iliffe. *Africans: The History of a Continent.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiii + 365 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86438-1; $24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-68297-8.

Reviewed by Christopher Lee
Published on H-SAfrica (November, 2008)
Commissioned by Peter C. Limb

The Whole Equation

This general history of Africa by John Iliffe is the second edition of a much-acclaimed version that appeared in 1995. Its quality has not diminished. The main difference between this edition and the first is a final chapter on HIV/AIDS and other contemporary issues that builds upon his recent book *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History* (2006). Otherwise, the original twelve chapters remain with some revision, spanning 3.6 billion years total–if his brief discussion of Africa's geological history is included–but primarily focusing on the past five hundred years and within that the last one hundred. This textbook is ideal for a general introductory course on African history for university undergraduates. It could also be used as part of a more specialized course focusing on Africa's early modern and modern periods.

Given its breadth, collecting his chapters into groups is most useful for a review of this kind. The first three chapters deal with Africa's deep history: the aforementioned geological era, but also recent work on human evolution through DNA analysis, the emergence of pastoral and agricultural communities, the diffusion of metal working, and the migration of Bantu language-speaking people across eastern and southern Africa. Immediately notable, and unavoidable, about these initial chapters is Iliffe's integration of North African and sub-Saharan African history, an approach that is eventually sustained through the twentieth century. If this initial group of chapters lays the basic groundwork for understanding Africa as a historical place populated by communities who actively sought to shape it, the next three chapters venture into a thematic fray more familiar to the present, if still separated by centuries. Chapter 5, for example, addresses the early histories of Christianity and Islam, from St. Mark's purported visit to Alexandria in AD 61 to the complex set of politics and violence between Christian and Islamic authorities in the Horn of Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a situation that reinforced the presence of the Ethiopian Church up to the modern era. The two chapters that follow address the growth of states and the spread of trade in western, eastern, central, and southern Africa from approximately the fifth century to the late eighteenth century. Iliffe employs the term "colonisation" in these chapters to describe this broad process of interaction and the political interests and power that underpinned it. This strategy combined with previous discussion of premodern religious history, in sum, posits a useful *longue durée* perspective for students only familiar with the modern period–themes of colonization and the advent of Christianity did not begin with the arrival of Europeans, but in fact have a deep-rooted indigenous history.

The remaining chapters focus primarily on this entangled history between Africa and the West. Chapters 7 and 8 form an early modern pair by accounting for the Atlantic slave trade and the brief period of legitimate trade and political consolidation during the nineteenth century, when the Islamic revolutions of West Africa and the Mfecane in southern Africa suggested the existence of African trajectories toward political modernity. These were soon rendered moribund by European colonial intrusion, the subject of chapters 9 and 10. The main, two-pointed argument that Iliffe puts forward about the colonial period is that first, it compelled an escalation of African economic integration into the world economy (albeit with an ongoing set of structural inequalities observable at micro- and macroeconomic levels) and second, it led to a period of demographic growth, which in his view constitutes a central dynamic of Africa's twentieth-century history. Surrounding these main arguments are discussions of colonial state formation, political activism, education, and other familiar themes of social change during this period. Chapter 11 moves forward to cover decolonization and the early postcolonial period up to 1980, with its mixture of future possibility

followed by disappointment and pessimism, especially during the 1970s, through elements of authoritarian rule, civil conflict, and failed economic growth. This penultimate group of chapters on colonialism and its legacies is followed by a self-contained chapter on South Africa's tumultuous history from 1886, when gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand, to the end of apartheid in 1994. The final chapter "In the Time of AIDS" is not solely about AIDS but is essentially about the present, with discussion committed to such topics as the political effects of the Cold War's end, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the impact of neoliberal structural adjustment programs, and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.

In sum, this text succeeds on the basis of Iliffe's expansive coverage–he appears to hit all the major events, themes, and arguments developed over the past fifty years–and his admirable skill at synthesizing a wide range of material–not only people, places, and events, but what various research debates, such as those over DNA analysis or numbers in the transatlantic slave trade, tell us. It therefore accomplishes the basic requirements of a comprehensive textbook. As hinted before, Iliffe's approach is influenced by Fernand Braudel and the Annales school of history, if tacitly so, with his maneuvering between large-scale changes and how they intersected with patterns of everyday life. Iliffe is equally comfortable discussing households, generational inequality, rural-urban migration, and local religious life as he is demarcating major political and demographic shifts that affected the entire continent. Furthermore, Iliffe's commitment to African agency, as captured in his expression "the frontiersmen of mankind," (p. 1) is well established. Indeed, combined with the environmental challenges that the continent has consistently presented, it is this factor and the complex responses that have ensued over time that bring his history together. As he writes:

Africans have been and are the frontiersmen who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race. That has been their chief contribution to history. It is why they deserve admiration, support, and careful study. The central themes of African history are the peopling of the continent, the achievement of human coexistence with nature, the building up of enduring societies, and their defence against aggression from more favoured regions. (p. 1)

Teachers may, of course, need to look elsewhere for deeper discussion of topics that receive too quick or generalized notice in Iliffe's narrative. Some individual claims will no doubt be liable to debate. For example, Iliffe's claim that "The Cape Colony was one of the most rigid and oppressive slave societies in history" (p. 128) is open to wide discussion. But beyond the details of specific regions and periods that have been too swiftly treated or inadvertently neglected, there are more general characteristics that may be cited as creating empirical imbalances or thematic disjunctures. His textbook maintains the primacy of the Atlantic world over the Indian Ocean region, for example, despite recent growth in scholarship on the latter. Chapters on the postcolonial period also feel less assured, undoubtedly a reflection of the relative paucity of historical work on this period. South Africa additionally remains anomalous, a predicament common to most textbooks. Iliffe signals this himself in the isolated treatment in chapter 12 of modern South African history though, curiously, the seventeenth-century establishment of the Cape Colony by the Dutch is located earlier in chapter 6, as part of a discussion committed to the precolonial era. His innovative use of "colonisation" to describe pre-eighteenth century political dynamics, as mentioned before, enables some maneuverability. However, uninitiated students will likely find this discontinuity confusing.

Overall, *Africans: The History of a Continent* manages to be comprehensive and unifying without essentializing the social, political, and economic diversity intrinsic to Africa's peoples, regions, and nation-states. Iliffe is to be commended once again in this revised edition for achieving this challenging task with the narrative eloquence that has characterized his work over the course of a long and distinguished career.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christopher Lee. Review of Iliffe, John, *Africans: The History of a Continent.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23067

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.