

Phyllis Taoua. *African Freedom: How Africa Responded to Independence.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xi + 321 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-108-44616-7.

Reviewed by Emma Hunter

Published on H-Diplo (January, 2020)

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In *African Freedom*, Phyllis Taoua offers a study of “meaningful freedom” in Africa since independence from the perspective of literary studies (p. 8). This book is a strikingly original and important intervention and while it may take traditional scholars of diplomatic history into unfamiliar territory, it well repays the effort.

Taoua’s focus on “freedom” may seem to take her onto well-trodden ground. But Taoua makes a strong case as to why a new approach is needed. The nationalist leaders of the mid-twentieth century succeeded in persuading the world that freedom was synonymous with national liberation. And yet, Taoua argues, “national liberation did not deliver meaningful freedom to the majority of people in Africa” (p. 8). Taoua makes the case for disentangling freedom from national liberation, in order to explore “how activists and leaders, as well as writers and filmmakers, engaged with the idea of freedom” in Africa after independence (p. 9).

In a compelling introduction, Taoua describes how she came to write this book. She describes her frustration with postcolonial theories that seemed disconnected from the realities of life in Africa and unhelpful to her in her quest to explain “postcolonial dispossession in Africa” (p. 13). The result was that she turned away from the critical tools of postcolonial theory and found herself

writing about “an ongoing struggle for meaningful freedom” over the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first (p. 13).

Taoua’s focus is on the world of fiction and film. Over the course of five rich substantive chapters, she explores her theme through a series of texts and their authors from across the African continent, from the familiar—such as Ayi Kwei Armah’s 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* or Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2006 film *Bamako*—to the less well known, such as Armah’s 1970 novel *Fragments*. At the same time, while not an ethnography, the book is firmly grounded in Taoua’s experiences of living in Niger, being married to a Nigerien, Sidi-Amar Taoua, and interviewing writers across Francophone Africa. Some of the most arresting images in the book are taken from her accounts of the encounters that these experiences produced.

The book is also forged in dialogue with the social sciences, in particular with Orlando Patterson’s account in *Freedom and the Making of Western Culture* (1991) of how and why the pursuit of freedom became increasingly important in modern African history, and Amartya Sen’s concern with development as freedom (*Development as Freedom*, 1999). Taoua recognizes that her approach will not find favor with all, and in particu-

lar with those such as Walter Mignolo who see Amartya Sen's work as a "a form of re-Westernization" (p. 25). For Mignolo, Taoua writes, "'freedom' is a Western concept that has been imposed on non-Western people" and scholars should instead seek alternative conceptions of freedom from beyond the West (p. 25). Taoua rejects Mignolo's analysis. She argues that Mignolo's argument rests on his assumption that "Western gatekeepers are no longer needed in a polycentric capitalist world," but, she writes, while this may become true in the future, it was not the case in the period she is studying in this book. Taoua makes the case for Sen's approach, and by extension her own approach, as "a compelling anti-imperial corrective" that takes seriously the perspectives of those "whose interests are at stake" and aims at "enhancing their capacity to live a life they have reason to value" (p. 25).

The structure that Taoua adopts is thematic. She takes five areas—the intimate self, gender, nation, the world, and the spiritual realm—and devotes a chapter to each. While the chapters are not equal in terms of length, they each play a substantial role in the overall argument and fit neatly together.

Taoua's book draws inspiration from across disciplines, and in return, it will surely speak back across the disciplines. Why, then, will this book be of interest to historians? I will consider here how the book opens up new frameworks for international historians and in particular historians of decolonization and the political history of Africa after independence, which it does in a number of ways. I begin by focusing on chapter 3, "The Nation: From Liberation to Meaningful Freedom." In this chapter, Taoua returns to the point she started with and demonstrates why we must not be satisfied with the claim made by the nationalist leaders of the twentieth century that "national sovereignty" was the "ultimate gage of freedom" (p. 201).

Making this argument requires Taoua to challenge the powerful narrative of decolonization that we find in Basil Davidson's book *The Black Man's Burden* (1992) which, she notes, has played a role in shaping scholarship beyond African history, including within her own discipline of literary studies. In Davidson's account of decolonization, models of the nation-state which African leaders borrowed from Europe prove unsuited to African realities. But Davidson's account is, Taoua writes, a "dystopic narrative of African decolonization according to which the nation-state tragically becomes the 'black-man's burden'" (p. 202). While his interpretation echoes that of many of the writers of the 1960s and 1970s, it is, she writes, "largely idealistic, without seriously grappling with the imperfect options that were actually at hand." Instead, Taoua situates her analysis in relation to the recent work of Frederick Cooper (such as *Africa since 1940*, 2020) and his account of decolonization and the emergence of the "gatekeeper state," and explores how writers and filmmakers explored other aspects of freedom and the difficulties of realizing meaningful freedom under the conditions of the nation-state.

From this basis, Taoua is able to depart from the overarching pessimism of many accounts of postcolonial political life and show the ways in which, in the texts she studies, "the attainment of political self-determination through emancipation from foreign rule is just one aspect of freedom in African narratives that represent national sovereignty in relation to other spheres of experience and different kinds of freedom" (p. 202). In this way, her book will speak to historians interested in political thought and action in the post-colonial state, who are increasingly asking similar questions of their sources.

The book's discussion of gender will also repay close attention by historians. As Taoua notes, while scholars have increasingly come to understand the ways in which "the idea of the nation and discourses of nationalism are marked by gen-

der as well as by normative masculinities and femininities,” they have paid less attention to “women’s engagement with the ideal of freedom” (p. 106). In her exploration of the intimate self in chapter 1, Taoua considers Mariama Bâ’s classic novel *So Long a Letter* (1981). In *So Long a Letter*, Taoua writes, “the narrative of national liberation is reconsidered in terms of whether men *and* women enjoy the freedom to live the kinds of lives they have reason to value” (p. 85). Taoua builds on this analysis in chapter 2, which is devoted to the theme of gender. Here, Taoua focuses on five women writers, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Assia Djebar, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In contrast to some literature scholars who see women’s writing as essentially allegorical, in the sense that the domestic “stands in” for the nation, Taoua argues that we should instead see these novelists’ discussion of women’s struggles for freedom in relation to love and to their personal lives as one dimension within “broader questions of social justice and the political legacy of national liberation” (p. 108). Women were, Taoua argues, “more aware of the multifaceted aspects of freedom precisely because of their subjugation within patriarchal societies” (p. 136). For historians of decolonization and postcolonial Africa, who are increasingly calling attention to the remasculinization of politics after independence, this discussion opens up new possibilities for connecting the social and cultural history of women’s pursuit of freedom in the postcolonial state with the questions that political historians typically ask.

While the book will, as I have suggested, speak to historians in a number of ways, Taoua’s approach is not, of course, that of the historian. For example, her structure of closing each chapter with a concluding section separating out different types of freedom (instrumental, substantive, existential) was not one I had previously encountered, though I came to appreciate it as a fruitful way of bringing out the themes explored in the preceding chapter and helping to put the individual chap-

ters into dialogue with each other. Taoua’s thematic rather than chronological approach slightly limited her ability to fully develop her arguments about the ways in which the dynamics of freedom changed over time in the decades since independence and in dialogue with shifting patterns of global inequality. However, this was to some extent countered by a chronological dimension within chapters. And focusing on writers and filmmakers entails a focus on elites, rather than on more popular forms of cultural production. But as I hope is clear, this is a powerful and important book that opens up new perspectives on the history of the struggle for freedom in Africa, and it deserves a wide readership.

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Citation: Emma Hunter. Review of Taoua, Phyllis. *African Freedom: How Africa Responded to Independence*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2020.

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