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Moving Forward, Staying Still: African Scholarship in the Anti-Colonial Age

The title of this book, as well as the headings for its three parts, are all taken from a sonnet by William Butler Yeats. Even Toyin Falola’s introductory chapter is entitled “Great Wings Beating Still,” another extract from Yeats’s poem. Falola writes in his acknowledgements that the poem “The Second Coming” (1920) is an appropriate springboard for this volume. The trouble is that the dramatic and violent phrases utilized as rubrics—the “The Dark Webs,” “Brute Blood of the Air,” “A Sudden Blow,” and “The Broken Wall” (signifying respectively the title; Part A: “History (Context and Change);” Part B: “Texts and Creativity”; and Part C: “Scholars and Their Reflections”)—are taken from another Yeats sonnet, “Leda and the Swan” (1928), something the editor should have known given that chapter 12 on “Coloniality in Fiction” (by Brian Worsfeld) opens with the “Brute Blood of the Air” stanza from “Leda and the Swan.” In a way it would have been more appropriate to have used the lines of “The Second Coming”: Chinua Achebe did (“Things fall apart; the centre will not hold”), a poem which reveals Yeats’s abhorrence of war, imperialism, and lust for power, a poem which could be interpreted as supporting the mind (reason) over passion (emotion). *The Dark Webs* is, after all, promoted as an “intellectual history of colonialism in Africa” (dust jacket). The rape of the swan by Zeus in “Leda and the Swan” could be seen as a metaphor for colonialism (and the feminization of the continent?) but it is sometimes hard to see the relevance of the section headings to essays incorporated in them. I have, perhaps, spent too long on what might seem like a minor point but slips such as this, along with many repetitions, point to a hasty editorial job. Toyin Falola is a distinguished and prolific Africanist, author of many erudite yet accessible books on African history and culture, but *The Dark Webs* seems a hastily composed mixed bag of offerings.

Reviewing an edited collection (there are twenty-one chapters, with eight of them—covering roughly half the book—on history) is always a difficult task. The chapters are invariably uneven in quality (as is the case here) and sometimes (as here) the connection to the conceptual thrust of the work is tentative. At the same time, concentrating on individual chapters detracts from a discussion of the overall impact of the work. The book claims to “offer fresh insights on the nature of colonial power and the African encounter with imperialism” (dust jacket). Does it?

The nature of colonial power and the African encounter with imperialism is primarily a question of history. It may well be that literature and cultural anthropology are important in dissecting the relationship of colonizer and colonized, but for us to understand the colonial encounter these disciplines must pay homage to history. Without historicization the colonial encounter becomes static, with the agents and actors assuming fixed roles, with structures frozen in time and change triggered only by “sudden blows” that shatter the casing of those structures. Given that we rely on historians to analyze the past, then “fresh insights” can only be understood with what might be termed scholarly trends.

The final section of this book—“The Broken Wall”—
deals with “Scholars and their Reflections.” As E. H. Carr postulated in his classic text *What is History?* (1961), to know history you must know your historian. Part C is devoted mainly to historians. For those of us whose undergraduate years coincided with the last phase of decolonization, some of these scholars are household names: Kenneth Dike (2006 marks the fiftieth anniversary of his *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, which I think is the first modern monograph on African history written by an African); A. Adu-Boahen, who died on 24 May this year, after this collection went to press; J. F. Ade Ajayi, the Nigerian historian already honored in a *Festschrift* by Toyni Falola; Cheikh Anta Diop, the scholar who postulated the Egyptian origins of civilization; and Bethwell Ogot, a pioneer of east African history.[1] Part C also has chapters on Ruth First and Olive Schreiner compared, and on Robert Mugabe.

What these scholars had in common was that they eclipsed the condescension that passed as African history before they came on the scene, and destroyed a Eurocentrism that saw Africans as nobodies, as passive recipients of a beneficent colonialism concerned only with their elevation or, in Lord Lugard’s words, “the moral and material regeneration” of the continent. These pioneering African historians viewed colonialism as an episode, not the be-all and end-all of African history, and they promoted oral tradition and oral history. Moreover, they were activists, especially in the field of university education in their own countries. Margery Perham’s insistence in 1951 that Africa was “without writing and so without history”[2] drew this rejoinder from Dike: “there is no criterion by which to compare one culture in terms of progress with another” as each “is the product of the environment and must primarily be judged in relation to the community.” The negative view of Africa was not based on scholarship, Dike wrote, but on “preconceived notions” (quoted, pp. 314-315 in the chapter by Apollos Nwauwa). When Dike became the very first African to teach African history at an African university in Ibadan, 1950, there was a course on colonialism with the unlikely title, “The History of Colonization of Africa by Alien Races!” Dike proceeded to “Africanize” the curriculum.

These scholars emerged at a particular juncture in the annals of colonialism, when educated Africans had managed to form what Basil Davidson called a fragile association with peasants and workers, in what are commonly referred to as modern mass nationalist movements.[3] This was during the last phase of formal colonialism. There was a strong moral tone to these scholars’ works, and one which, like the nationalist movements themselves, equated unity with liberation. Yet, there was also a commitment to the empiricist tradition, to the principles and methods of good history and good writing, to studies that moved beyond Western sources (while still using them) into the realm of oral history and oral tradition. We may criticize these scholars (unfairly, given the moment they lived in) for avoiding the ethnic, gender, and class divisions which symbolized the colonial dialectic (see p. 371), but we should respect them for the paradigm shift in African history they effected and for opening up the pathways for those who succeeded them. In that sense, part C, in honor of these scholars, is a fitting tribute.

Part A, on the other hand, or rather several of its chapters, is not as satisfactory to my mind. Most of these chapters focus on specifics and particulars, such as the Igala response to colonialism, Niger Delta history, and the 1947 Cohen proposal for decolonization. In this section there are three surveys. Hakim Adi’s “The African Diaspora, Pan-Africanism and Anticolonial Ideologies” is particularly rewarding. The others are on Ethiopianism in Christianity and Cultural Nationalism. However, “fresh insights” are rarely found in such syntheses, no matter how competent. I am not a West Africanist but I do know that the historiography has moved far beyond what is being delivered. One chapter has a 53-item bibliography yet as many as 39 of these pre-date 1980. Many of the other chapters have similarly outdated historiographies, and have little in the way of primary documentation, with scanty oral sources cited. If the sources used constitute the foundation of scholarship then the edifice is on shaky ground.

Running throughout the book is the idea that “core” cultures or “pure” cultures are superior to extreme forces (colonialism, capitalism) but are undermined by them. Such ideas can be traced to the early (interwar) anthropologists and structural-functionalism, but they resurfaced in the 1960s and 1970s with nationalist history and theories of underdevelopment. Toyni Falola sums this up in chapter 1 with his belief that “the colonial era stands between the period of [so-called] plenty [!] in the pre-colonial and that of want in the postcolonial” (p. 12). The transformations, hybridities, social constructions (ethnicities), and changes wrought by colonial contact (and *The Dark Web’s* colonialism is mainly British) are glossed over, eroded even, with what might be termed the “layer” theory of colonialism: “the colonial era [Falola continues] was constructed on a layer of indigenous nations” (p. 12).
The various authors in this collection who explicitly refer to the causes of colonialism see those causes rooted in economic expansion and exploitation. Certainly there is not one author in this collection that sees colonialism as anything other than completely bad/oppressive. It is not that I am an apologist for colonialism or think that we can draw up a balance sheet; it is just that the oppressor/victim binary is no longer a fruitful framework of enquiry. It was this type of literature I think that the British imperial historian Jack Gallagher thought of when he said that colonialism was the easiest government easiest to attack. There have been so many advances in the historiography, especially in social history (see for example James Currey’s Social History Series which kicked off in 1991 with Myron Echenberg’s Herskovitz Award-winning Colonial Conscripts), and in cultural history, and also the new political history on the nature of the colonial state, as seen in the works of Mahmood Mamdani, Crawford Young, and others.[4]

The second section of the book, on text and context, does explore postcoloniality with essays on the post-apartheid imagination, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Micere Mugo, coloniality in fiction, Africa’s new intellectuals and écriture engage, and Valentin-Yves Mudimbe. Some of these chapters do engage the fiction-history connection but the historical scholarship is, again, somewhat lacking. Olayemi Akinwumi’s statement in the chapter on Ngugi that “the Mau Mau rebellion … could be traced to the first day colonial rule was declared” (p. 235)—meaning, presumably, the beginnings of colonial contact in the 1890s, not when it was officially declared in 1920— reminds one of Terence Ranger’s 1968 thesis on the connections of primary resistance movements to modern mass nationalism.[5] Given the importance of Mau Mau to Ngugi, some reference to the flourishing Mau Mau literature that has burgeoned in the past twenty years (starting with the works of David Throup, Frank Furedi and Tabitha Kanogo) would have tempered such a claim, and should have been tapped.[6]

In an earlier chapter, in part A, we learn that Ghanaian independence could be attributed to the advent of Asian independence, a view advanced in 1973 by D. A. Low in his Lion Rampant (not mentioned in the chapter) but a view with little or no credibility since the opening of the archives.[7] A later chapter, devoted to Robert Mugabe, attributes the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe in 1980 to ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National-Patriotic Front), with no mention of John Vorster, Kenneth Kaunda, the independence of Angola and Mozambique, sanctions, or British and U.S. intervention. It all boils down, it seems, to Mugabe’s quest for freedom from despotism, with Mugabe characterized as a Marxist revolutionary from the start. The phrase “freedom from colonial hegemony based on scientific socialism” is repeated so many times that the author is left in a bit of quandary trying to explain the contemporary crisis in Zimbabwe. “It is doubtful whether he [Mugabe] can still implement any socialist revolutionary program because of the political opponents who have continually resisted him” (p. 455). If only those barriers could be removed!

There are a few mistakes and overstatements in the book. On page 271, colonialism is described as “an event.” On page 24 “cultural imperialism involved an assault on practically all aspects of African culture,” a statement undermined by colonial support of customary authority, the paucity in numbers of colonial agents, and the vacuity of the so-called civilizing mission. On page 362 we learn of the need to capture Africa’s “true history.” This is not helped by the map of Africa in 1880 (p. 25) which places the Lozi (correctly) in southwestern Zambia but the same group, indicated with the Europeanized name Barotse, in northwestern Zambia. Of the British colonies, Natal is omitted.

The superb chapter on Mudimbe connecting history, autobiography, and philosophy shows that the Congolese intellectual recognized the ambiguities of colonialism. The late Adu Boahen’s reflections on the shortcomings of both the die-hard colonialists on the one hand and the underdevelopmentalists on the other have resonance here: “Indeed, my charge against colonialism is not that it did not do anything for Africa, but that it did so little and that little so accidentally and indirectly” (pp. 396-397). Overall, however, the nuances and ambiguities of colonialism are missing in many of the chapters. It is not that The Dark Webs is without value. In understanding the first surge of “Africanist” historical writing it is. In understanding the meaning of postcolonial literature it also has much to offer. But in getting to grips with the changing political relationship we call “colonialism” it is important to move beyond the Afrocentric view, for instance in the manner of Mahmood Mamdani’s Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism, published ten years ago by Princeton University Press. Mamdani’s assault on Western scholarship and prescriptive models aimed at recolonizing Africa should have found some resonance in this volume. His provocative thesis on the bifurcated colonial state certainly constitutes a novel perspective on colonialism, on the relationship between colonizer and colonized and on
the tensions within colonized societies. The volume under review does not investigate the nature of the colonial state (nor does it mention Mamdani) and the multiple social relationships (including colonizer-colonized) get short shrift. I was expecting and hoping for more from the historical sections of *The Dark Webs*.

Notes


[2]. One should bear in mind that Perham was a major critic of white settler supremacy; see in particular her correspondence with the pro-settler Elspeth Huxley in Huxley and Margery Perham, *Race and Politics in Kenya* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).


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