An Accolade for A. S. Kanya-Forstner’s Contributions to African History

African Agency and European Colonialism is a festschrift to honor Sydney Kanya-Forstner, now professor emeritus at York University. It pays tribute to his “contribution of historical research at large and to his contribution as a teacher/mentor to many students of African colonial history that have passed through the History Department of York University” (p. 152). In terms of geographic reach, the subjects covered range from Nigeria and Benin to Zimbabwe and South Africa, and even Britain. Considering Kanya-Forstner’s focus on French actions in West Africa one might view as ironic the fact that there is really only one chapter on francophone Africa, Tamba E. M’bayo’s essay on Bou El Mogdad Seck in Senegal. But one might conclude more felicitously that this demonstrates the great scope of Kanya-Forstner’s influence.

As with some such collections, the essays vary substantially in terms of quality. Most are based on original archival research and are quite brief. Although Kanya-Forstner inspired the volume, many of the contributions owe more to James C. Scott’s work on resistance and Frederick Cooper’s 1994 “Conflict and Connection” essay in The American Historical Review that suggested historians move beyond oversimplified interpretations of African history. Indeed, almost all of its eleven essays seek to problematize colonial encounters that might appear straightforward, in the process recovering Africans’ agency in such exchanges. Most of the authors do so by means of local histories or case studies of particular moments during Europe’s expansion into Africa in the modern period.

Some chapters are more successful than others. Paul Lovejoy presents a brief but intriguing study of northern Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century and Alhaji Ahmad el-Fellati’s role in increasing the influence of the Tijaniyya, which then became the dominant Islamic brotherhood during the colonial period. Staying in Nigeria, Chima J. Korieh presents an illuminating essay on women’s protests against taxation that forced administrators to concede so as to be able to maintain order in the eastern part of the colony. Uyilawa Usuanlele and Victor Osaro Edo unveil the tactic of flight that some Beninese used to escape into Nigeria and avoid European rule well into the 1930s, while Pule Phoofolo’s piece on Basotho relations with the British show just how beholden the latter were to African leaders in the 1890s. These chapters demonstrate that colonial encounters were often shaped by multiple forces rather than dichotomously, and remind us not to be deceived by simplistic portrayals of African history, such as the many maps that depict tidy borders crisscrossing the continent during the colonial period.

A number of weaknesses detract from the other essays, such as when some of the authors set up straw men in an attempt to demonstrate the originality of their research. For example, Mohammed Bashir Salau’s chapter that claims the population of Kaduna had a signifi-
cant influence over the shape of British rule in the region begins by stating that "the Northern Nigeria colonial authorities and their reforms never were the sole determinant of historical development in general nor of the colonial experience in particular" (p. 105). Few scholars would disagree with such an assertion today. Femi J. Kolapo’s chapter on "Africans in A. S. Kanya-Forstner’s Study of French Colonialism in Africa" goes astray by dwelling more on John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson’s contributions to the historiography of British imperialism in Africa, giving the reader little idea as to the place of Africans in Kanya-Forstner’s many writings. Meanwhile, Tamba M’bayo’s essay arguing that Bou El Mogdad Seck’s work as a translator for the French in Senegal shows how “interpreters were by no means mere lackeys of French officials” fails to support its thesis (p. 25). The fact that Bou El Mogdad was paid for playing “a key role in facilitating the extension of French control beyond Saint-Louis into the interior” belies M’bayo’s interpretation (p. 42).

M’bayo’s contribution is a good reminder that in his 1994 AHR article, Cooper did not call for the abandonment of the notion of resistance and related dichotomies such as colonizer versus colonized, resister versus collaborator, and destructive colonialism versus productive indigenuousness. Rather, he called for historians to use such notions as starting points for studies that should be carried out and thought through in a more nuanced manner. This means that one can still call a collaborator a collaborator if that is the case.

In fact, Cooper’s 1994 AHR article is a touchstone for so many essays in the volume that the bibliography cites it twice. Which brings up a final point, namely that the typographical, spelling, formatting, and other errors in the volume are so numerous as to be distracting. The apparent lack of copy editing leads not only to repeated if slight annoyances but in one case to the omission of an entire sentence or section. This is unfortunate considering the usefulness of some of its essays and the esteemed scholar it honors.

Note


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