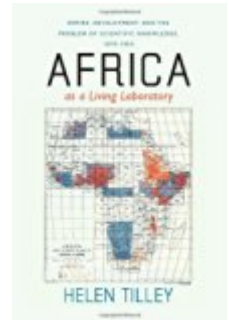


Helen Tilley. *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 528 pp. \$29.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-80347-0.



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Commissioned by Robert J. Mayhew (University of Bristol)

Using classical methods of historical research, this inspiring and extremely detailed work of Helen Tilley evaluates the kinds of scientific knowledge necessary for imperial administration. This is through her focus on an unprecedented metropolitan project, which has long been interpreted by historians as a turning point in Britain's administration of its African territories, that is, the African Research Survey. A decade-long endeavor (1929-38), the African Research Survey was designed to examine the extent to which "modern" knowledge was being applied to African problems. It served as a main authority for consultation on the part of the British colonial policy architects; and gave an impetus to British development schemes until the era of decolonization. Yet this is the first time that light has been shed on the survey's epistemological discourses and their inherent contradictions, taking into account several diverse but interrelated fields, such as ecology, epidemiology, agriculture, anthropology, and psychology.

Some of the framing analytical themes of *Africa as a Living Laboratory* come from academic literature in fields other than the history of science, such as archaeology, sociology, communication, and colonial (urban) studies. Tilley's originality, however, lays not only in connecting these themes to science's historiography, but also in weaving in them, through a careful study, threads of quite unexpected revelations. For instance, the book consciously highlights the interactions among power, political economy, and knowledge production (à la Michel Foucault), and signals the weakness of power and legitimacy in colonial knowledge production (à la Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* [2004], for instance).[1] Indeed, both references deal with the "margins of power," that is, the "other" within the metropolitan society or under the colonial situation, such as in colonial India. At the same time, Tilley's contribution shows that subversive knowledge production could steam directly from the very heart of colonial power in Britain and tropical Africa. It thus offers not much about "what

Africans themselves think or wish" or "a view from below," but a thorough examination of the ways by which Africa was "decolonized" by scientific research (pp. 330, 24). This was enabled through an auto-critique of Western scientists, their ability to challenge contemporary stereotypes and destabilize Eurocentric perspectives, their repeated arguments as to the practical importance and relevance of indigenous scientific knowledge, and their consideration of African topics on their own terms.

Another example for this is the notion "living laboratory" that the book establishes well. Originally taken from Lord Hailey's (the chief coordinator of the survey) declaration in the opening pages of the 1938 published report--"Africa presents itself as a living laboratory, in which the reward of study may prove to be not merely the satisfaction of an intellectual impulse, but an effective addition to the welfare of the people"--this notion passes throughout the book as a leitmotif (p. 5).[2] It is interesting to note that in the post-colonial literature of the last two decades, this notion or equivalent notions, such as "experimental terrains" (*champs d'experience*), first appeared and were analyzed against the background of the French colonial urbanism in (North) Africa almost exclusively.[3] While since then these notions have been cited by numerous scholars, they were appropriately investigated by only a few. In fact, as we are aware, Tilley's work is a pioneer in discussing the notion "living laboratory" in the context of the history of scientific knowledge on/in Africa rather than in the context of Africa's urban history; extending the discourse to the Anglophone context from its Francophone counterpart; and dealing with the relatively less intensively studied territories of tropical, sub-Saharan, Africa, rather than with North Africa, which has been abundantly researched. Together with this, it is surprising that while Tilley seems to be aware of at least some of these key studies regarding French Africa--she refers to them particularly in two endnotes (p. 12n31, p. 314n8)--she does not

explicitly discuss the subject in the body of text besides in a few lines!

The organization of the book chapters appears to be optimal considering the extent of such an ambitious project, rich in primary and secondary sources and with interdisciplinary overlaps. In trying to draw a comprehensive historical genealogy of the African Research Survey and its implications in terms of scientific epistemologies and applied research, the book is arranged, both chronologically and thematically, around seven chapters. Chapter 1 might be quite expected for African historians yet is essential for other audiences with whom the book is in dialogue, such as development experts and other scientists who rarely get a chance to consider the past. It sets the background for the "imperial laboratory" during the period of the "scramble" for Africa and the Berlin Conference (1884-85) in terms of the political climate and territorial acquisitions, geopolitics, and the activity of geographical and other metropolitan societies. This period is important as a preparation for the reader for the following chapter, because it is when the call for more and better facts about the continent had only just begun, especially by those who designed Britain's African empire. Chapter 2 concentrates on the project of the survey itself: its key architects, accompanying rhetoric, institutional and conceptual guiding lines, and the consolidation of the fields of knowledge it proposed to encompass. The chapter points to the survey's controversial origins, contemporary paradoxes, and gradual official triumph. It also provides stepping stones for the appreciation of the initial domestic debates regarding the character of colonial rule and the nature of colonial "development," considering the economic and sociopolitical factors that influenced the coordinators of the survey.

Chapters 3 to 6 refer to the same time span simultaneously, that is, from the late 1920s to the late 1930s--the years during which the survey had been crystallized. They cover environmental,

medical, racial, and anthropological subjects respectively, stressing the laboratory motif viewing processes of production of new knowledge and synthesizing the results. Chapter 7 concludes the study and gives an essential synoptic view about its main trends, and at the same time it provides glimpses into the postcolonial period. These glimpses imply the endurance of many of the philosophical struggles that had begun during the colonial era into the era of independence. I will not get into details here as to the contextual treatment of the chosen topics in each scientific field/chapter, as I believe that readers will naturally explore them in accordance with their personal interests or expertise. Among the examined major topics, however, are approaches to African environmental histories; agricultural and bio-scientific research; infectious diseases (highlighting the sleeping sickness); race prejudice and intelligence tests; anthropological research and ethnographic methods; and approaches to magical knowledge and witchcraft.

A noteworthy aspect in this book is the genuineness of the author as a scholar who certainly does not espouse the recently burgeoning post-colonial jargon of somewhat simplistic critique of the colonial period. Tilley's ability to interpret the evidence and to closely examine the colonial period in its own terms, especially regarding the aforementioned topics, is remarkable.

One of the most fascinating contributions of this book, in my opinion, is that from the very beginning it strengthens our awareness that the very people engaged in creating and maintaining structures of imperial domination in Africa were in fact those who questioned Europe's epistemic authority, truth claims, standards, and norms. In every discipline discussed, experts on the spot claimed that Africa had much to teach Europe, and that the latter should embrace and take into account vernacular sciences. In spite of inherent ironies typical to colonial situations, the promotion of indigenous perspectives competed with

European hegemony. This book is not, therefore, about "history from below," "the native point of view," or passive or heroic struggles of decolonization. It is an anatomy of the growing auto-critique that had been heard from European scientists acting within a range of disciplines, about the "irrational" and "grossly unjust and unfair" British administration. This quotation--the words are those of the British archaeologist Louis Leakey (1930), who, born and raised in Kenya, called himself "more a Kikuyu than an Englishman" (p. 316)--is exemplary of Tilley's argument. What this means is that such a regularly expressed epistemic decolonization weakened the rationale for empire and influenced--directly and indirectly, politically and conceptually--the will to maintain colonial structures of rule.

Two interrelated methodological issues should be noted in this volume, though relatively minor. The first is that since most of the study concentrates on the British Empire only, the book's title is misleading as it suggests that other colonial empires that were active in Africa are under investigation (unless it presumes that the reader, probably an Anglophone, would naturally imagine that it is Britain that is under review). The second is that, as implied above concerning the notion "living laboratory," references, even in passing, to equivalent topics that preoccupied contemporary scientific endeavors of other colonial powers in Africa are rare, if not completely missing. In this respect, the national, transnational, and colonial frontiers are given precedence over international or "pan-African" links--in spite of the book's stated aims--although the role of the League of Nations and the Rockefeller Foundation is treated. The resemblance between imperial arenas were strong, as in the case of segregationist tendencies following sanitary reforms and the outbreaks of infectious diseases. These were popular among most of the colonial regimes in the continent, but receive quite a short, British-specific, treatment in Tilley's book. Similarly, the influence of pan-African and international confer-

ences on non-British territories, or of non-English papers given in these conferences, is not mentioned. References to Alice Conklin's comprehensive study of French policies and the rhetoric of "development" (*mise en valeur*) in West Africa (*A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* [1997]); and to Brenda Yeoh's study on, inter alia, contested sanitary politics in British Singapore (*Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* [1996]), are strikingly missing.

Notes

[1]. Beyond knowledge production, the inherent weakness of the colonial state and its legitimacy was recently discussed with regard to colonial urban-landscape production in Africa and elsewhere. See, for example, Jennifer Robinson, "A Perfect System of Control? State Power and 'Native Locations' in South Africa," *Environment and Planning* 8, no. 2 (1999): 135-162; Garth Andrew Myers, *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003); and Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power and the Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[2]. Quoted from Lord Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), xxiv-xv.

[3]. See Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); David Parochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); and Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

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