Centring the Margins: Fifty Years of African Border Studies
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‘Saving Africa From Dangerous Ideas’
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Voiles, identités et visibilité des femmes musulmanes
dans l’espace public
KHEDIDJA MOKEDDEM
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The Africa Review of Books presents a biannual review of works on Africa in the social sciences, humanities and creative arts. It is also intended to serve as a forum for critical analyses, reflections and debates about Africa. As such, the Review solicits book reviews, reviews of articles and essays that are in line with the above objectives. Contributions that traverse disciplinary boundaries and encourage interdisciplinary dialogue and debate are particularly welcome.

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Les articles critiques et essais devront être des contributions originales : elles ne devront avoir fait l’objet d’aucune autre publication avant d’avoir été proposées, plus qu’elles ne pourraient être prises en considération pour d’autres publications au même moment.

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Les contributions devront commencer avec les détails de publication suivants : titre de l’ouvrage, auteur, éditeur, nombre de pages, prix et ISBN.

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Global Context

The inherently interdisciplinary and comparative nature of studies of borders of modern states, which are offshoots of the Westphalian system, has led to their broad categorization into ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ borders studies.1 Notably, among other things, the borderline is typically explored within frameworks of such established disciplines as History, Geography, Political Science, Economics and Law.

On the other hand, in ‘modern border studies’, popularized as ‘Borderlands Studies’ by North American experts who initially concentrated on the most spectacular, i.e. the U.S.-Mexico border (‘Where North Meets South’), the focus is on the border in its local setting. In contradistinction to ‘traditional border studies’, borderlands studies is the domain of local and comparative historians, regional geographers and economists, ethnographers, sociologists, anthropologists, epidemiologists, environmental engineers and regional planners.

In North America and Western Europe, the field, especially in its ‘modern’ edition as ‘Borderlands Studies’, has attracted the sustained attention of scholars and researchers. A veritable avalanche of scientific literature has been generated, and is still rapidly being generated, as to warrant its emergence in the mid-1970s as a distinct area of academic specialization.2

African Contributions

The publication of the two co-edited volumes under review in 2010, the Golden Jubilee Year of African Independences, provides perhaps the most opportune moment to engage in a reflection aimed not only at commenting on these two works but also using them as an appropriate platform for a critical review of African border scholarly literature and the contributions that have been made to the development of border and borderlands studies in the continent and globally.

The two publications provide typical illustrations of the range of contributions which African and Africanist scholars have made and are continuing to make to both border and borderlands studies and the blurring of the distinction or boundary between the two. The first, Governance and Border Security in Africa, as the title clearly denotes, is written from a statist perspective and is co-edited by two of Nigeria’s brightest political scientists with shared experiences as teachers at the University of Calabar, South-South Nigeria. Both of them later became members of the faculty of the two of the nation’s high-profile government establishments: Bassey, during a sabbatical leave, as Directing Staff at the African Centre for Strategic Research and Studies of the National Defence College; and Oshita, for sometime now, as the Director of Research and Policy Analysis of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, both in Abuja. As expected, the twenty-three chapters of the book are fascinating. Raising the general theme of the border as a risk factor to peace and state security: Part I (consisting of four chapters) addresses ‘policy and institutional context’; Part II (six chapters) is focussed on ‘Conflict Development and Management’; Part III, the largest section of the book, is made up of the remaining thirteen chapters and is devoted to the discussion of different aspects of ‘border security management regimes’.

On the other hand, the second book, Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa, places a refreshing emphasis on the localized impacts of the border and explores the borderlands as sui generis. The book bears the stamp of unmistakable originality in the nine substantive essays on the various strategies by which borderland communities (opportunistc nationalists, irredentists, separatists and unionists, cross-border alliance seekers and regionalists, rebels and smugglers) explore and exploit the border in their diverse contexts and situations not just to survive but even to flourish economically, socially, culturally and politically. Of particular fascination is the different transborder peoples living across these borders (e.g. the Anywaa and the Nuer astride the Ethio-Sudanese border) play distinctly different games around the issue of national identity vis-a-vis kinsh and kin on the other side of the boundary (pp.27-44).

Unlike the co-editors of Governance and Border Security in Africa, civil servants and establishment scholars, so to speak, Dereje Feyisa and Markus Hoehne, the co-editors of Borders and Borderlands as Resources, are seasoned social anthropologists. The first is an Ethiopian scholar and author of a distinguished doctoral dissertation on the internationally reputed bilingual journal Of Borderlands Studies (IBS) in 1986. A clear pointer to comparable developments in Europe is to be found in a special issue of IBS co-edited by Joachim Blatter and Norris Clement,3 to say nothing about the European Community Studies Association, which embraces members whose works are about commitment to the ideal of ‘Europe Without Frontiers’.

Centring the Margins: Fifty Years of African Border Studies

Anthony I. Asiwaju

Governance and Border Security in Africa by Celestine Bassey and Oshita O. Oshita, eds.

Malthouse Press Ltd for University of Calabar Press (Lagos), 2010, xvi+327 pages

&

Border and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa by Dereje Feyisa and Markus Hoehne, eds.

James Currey, 2010, xv+205 pages
engaged in regional integration projects, precisely because the success of such projects, in the final analysis, is the answer to the basic policy questions posed by both the border and its frontiers. One admirable feature common to both these apparently companion volumes is the balance maintained between theoretical and empirical data and the scholarly introductory discourses by the co-editors in each case, which help readers to situate the presentation of each volume within its wider regional and international context. Matters of detail, however, the editors and publishers of Borders and Borderlands as Resources would appear to have done a much more skilful job of editing than their counterparts in Governance and Border Security. On the whole, these two works illustrate the two interdigitating, though distinct, phases in the evolution of ‘border studies’ and the manifestations of the visibility of the border as a counterpoint to its invisibility in and of itself in the African continent.**The Last 50 Years**

This visibility is evidenced principally in the substantial and steadily growing scholarly literature, antecedent to the two edited volumes under review. The foundation was solidly laid in the rich European archives that emanated from the delimitations and demarcations that followed the infamous era of the European scramble for and partition of Africa at the turn of the 19th Century. As with African historiography in general, the process was initiated by European experts (historians, jurists and political geographers) whose pioneering publications characteristically reflected European imperialist and coloniser rather than indigenous African perspectives. Among these were Sir E. Herlett’s three-volume Map of Africa by Treaty (1909), precursor of the late Ian Brownlie’s authoritative African Boundaries: A Legal and Diplomatic Encyclopaedia (London: C. Hurst and Co. Publishers, 1979); and Sybil E. Crowe, The Berlin West African Conference 1884-1885 (London: Longman, Green & Co. 1942), the first comprehensive publication on the conference, surpassed only relatively recently by S. Foster, W.J. Mommens and R. Robinson (Eds.), Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the German Historical Institute, London, 1988).

By the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when African and Africanist scholars became active, largely in response to the challenges posed by the newly achieved after independence having to be exercised within the inherently problematic territorial frameworks defined by the colonially arranged boundaries, scholarly focus was initially explicitly to the African frontiers themselves. Accordingly, we enter into the phase of the African perspective marked by a concern for the sovereign African States and the nation-building projects. Archetypical publications in this regard are, first and foremost, the two pioneer African case studies based on two doctoral theses, both submitted to the University of London in 1960, by J.C. Anene, a Nigerian historian, and J.R.V. Prescott, an Australian geographer. They were published in their revised editions, respectively in 1970 and 1971, as The International Boundaries of Nigeria (Vancouver: Talansus Research), A.C. McEwen’s International Boundaries of East Africa (Oxford: Oxford University Press), published contemporaneously, also grew out of the author’s higher degree dissertation. Saadia Touval’s The Boundary Politics of Independent Africa (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972) and Boutsou Boujou-Mbou’s Les Confins des Frontieres en Afrique (Etudes et Documents (Paris, 1973), followed quickly from Political Science, but the other from international Law perspective. A critical early warning signal to the essentially multidisciplinary and comparative nature of the field was provided in C.G. Widstrand (Ed.), Border and Boundary Problems in the Nordic Institute of African Studies, 1969), which also beamed the searchlight on issues of the borderlands as top research priority.


Further propagation of the field of African border and borderlands studies in Nigeria, spearheaded by University of Lagos, led to the organisation of seminars and conferences and the initiation of the University’s Centre for African Regional Integration and Border Studies (CARIBS). All these developments were marked by special scholarly publications, exemplified by A. Asiwaju and P.O. Adei’s Eds., Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Cooperative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa (University of Lagos Press, 1989). It also included Borderlands and African Integration (Lagos: PANAF Publishing Inc. 2008); Academic Disciplines and Border Studies (University of Lagos Press, 2007); and Contemporary Issues on Boundaries and Governance in Nigeria (Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005), all edited by R.T. Akinyele, Director of CARIBS since 2004. Equally, the expanding frontiers of borderlands studies are the National Boundary Commission’s publications based on the series of bilateral workshops on trans-border cooperation with each of Nigeria’s neighbours, organised between 1988 and 1993.

Since the 1980s, there has been a phenomenal expansion in the scholarly literature on Borderlands Studies in Nigeria. This would go beyond the limits of the initial productions in Nigeria. Typical in this regard are William F.S Miles’, HausaLand Divided: Colonialism and Independence in Nigeria and Niger (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Paul Nugent’s Smugglers, Secessionists and Local Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands Since 1914 (Legon: Ghana/Oxford/Athens, Ohio: Ghana Saharan Publishers/James Currey/ Ohio University Press, 2002). While both books, as explicitly acknowledged by the authors (Miles, 12, 16-62, 316-313 and Nugent, pp 4-9, 28), build on the foundations of such existing works as Western Yorubaland Under European Rule (1976) and the edited volume Partitioned Africans (1984), each has made distinctively original contributions to African borderlands studies.

By emphasis placed on issues of citizenship and identity, the award-winning work shares analytical interests and concerns with two other equally fascinating contemporary borderlands scholarly publications, albeit in two other different regions: Peter Sahlin’s Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees (Berkley: University of California Press, 1981) and the more contemporaneous Oscar J. Martínez’s, Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Tucson: University Arizona Press, 1994). Miles’ own commitment to comparative borderlands studies subsequently led him to primary research work in sites outside Africa, in South Asia and the South Sea, leading to several other admirable scholarly publications, most notably his ‘Citizens Without Soil: The French of India (Pondi cherry)’. Ethnic and Racial Studies (Vol. 11 No.2 1990, pages 250-273), and Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm: Identity and Development in Vanuatu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998). On the other hand, Nugent’s more explicit focus on the Ghana-Togo borderlands as a sui generis, his supplementary exploration of the anthropological research methodology, and his controversial utilitarian thesis about the border as a variable on which the local communities depend for their daily living and socio-economic welfare (e.g. as smugglers) make the book an attractive model and preferred reference point for the co-editors of Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa (pp. 10-13).

Of particular importance to the expansion of scientific literature on Borderlands Studies in Africa in the last half-century or so are the works (mostly by economic geographers, social anthropologists, regional historians and economists as well as criminologists) focusing on cross-border and wider regional flows of persons, goods and services. Typical titles in this genre include John O. Igue and B. Soule, L’Etat-entrepot au Benin: Commerce informel ou solution á la críse? (Paris: Karthala, 1992) and Igue’s own follow-up volume, Le Benin et la mondialisation de l’Economie: Les limites de l’intégration du Marche (Karthala, 1999). These geographic studies of cross-border trade in West Africa should be read conjointly with the more theoretically informed anthropopoological observer and poet in Janet MacGaffee et al, The Real Economy of Zaire: the Contribution of Smuggling and other Unofficial...


This survey of the rapid growth in African border and borderlands studies literature would be incomplete without reference to the contributions by experts in regional science, especially history and geography. The relevant publications include Boubacar Barry’s La Seigneurie du XV au XIX siecle: Traite ogresse, Islam et Conquete Coloniale (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1988) and, more recently, the strongly border- implied UNESCO-sponsored multi-volume case histories of nation-state problematics in regional integration, under the main title Les Etats-Nations Face à l’Integration regionale en Afrique de l’Ouest (National-States and the Challenges of Regional Integration in West Africa), one for each of the fifteen member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), published by Karthala in Paris, which he co-ordinated. Also sponsored by UNESCO under its Culture of Peace Project were the series of regional histories of International Boundaries and Borderlands which, in the case of Africa, has led to the publication of Des Frontieres en Afrique de l’XII au XIX siecle (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), proceedings of an International Symposium held in Bamako, Mali in 1997. Also serving the same purpose of wider regional perspective are books on cross-border relations, on wider regional canvas, such as Momar-Coumba Diop (Ed.), Le Senegal et Ses Voisins (Dakar: Societe-Espace-Temps, 1994), Bassey E. Ate and Bola A. Akinternwa (Eds.), Nigeria and Its Immediate Neighbours (Lagos: Pumark Nigeria Limited, 1992), Paul Nugent and A.I. Asiwaju (Eds.), African Boundaries: Barriers, Opportunities and Empowerment (London: Frances Pinter, 1996) and Wilbert Goorneratne and R. Obudho (Eds.), Contemporary Issues in Regional Development Policy: Perspectives from Eastern and Southern Africa (Aldershot, England: Avebury, Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997), notably Section 4 of the four component essays on ‘Least Developed Regions and Border Areas’, 203-260.

Future Projections

The growth and development of African border and borderlands studies would appear to have peaked with the creation on 13 June 2007 of the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE), following the foundation conference at the University of Edinburgh, U.K., hosted by the institution’s Centre of African Studies. The Network embraces researchers and institutions in Africa, Europe and North America, who share long-standing interests in all aspects of international boundaries and transborder phenomena in the continent. Though focused on borderlands as physical spaces and social spheres, the Network is also concerned with inter-related regional flows of persons, goods and services as well as socio-economic processes that may be located at some distance from the geographical border.

Since its creation, ABORNE has grown by leaps and bounds. It has held its Annual Conference on a regular basis: Bayreuth, Germany, in 2008; Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2009; Basel, Switzerland, in 2010. The 2011 conference is scheduled for September in Lisbon, Portugal. Each annual conference has focussed on a carefully selected pertinent theme; the Network’s membership has expanded spectacularly from the thirteen founding members in Edinburgh in 2007 to over 170 by the last Conference in Basel, members being drawn from Africa, Europe and North America. By 2009, the Network has also secured major funding support from the European Science Foundation, though mainly for members who are nationals of the contributing Member Nations of the European Union. It says a lot about the quality of the work of the Network members that they have been able to pool together a collection for the first ever African-perspective issue of the internationally reputed Journal of Borderlands Studies, entitled From Empiricism to Theory in African Border Studies (JBS, vol. 25 No.2. 2010) and guest-edited by David Coupland, Professor of Anthropology, at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and founding Member of ABORNE.

The evolution of African border studies has, therefore, come a long way in the last fifty years; but the cruising altitude, such as is in evidence in Europe and, especially, North America, is yet to be attained. For example, outside Dominique H. Zidouemba’s, Les Sources de l’Histoire des Frontieres de l’Ouest africaine (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions africaines, 1979), there are no specialized bibliographies of the same size and quality available for North America, especially the US-Mexico Borderlands. Nor is there a standard guide to relevant institutions and organisations, be it at the national, regional or continental level, to assist researchers. For a model, see Milton H. Jamail and Margo Gutierrez, 1992, The Border Guide: Institutions and Organizations of the United States-Mexico Borderlands, revised and updated edition of The United States-Mexico Border: A Guide to Institutions, Organizations, and Scholars, Austin, Texas: Centre for Mexican Studies.

Given the magnitude of boundary problems and the grave challenges posed to African peace and development processes, the continent should have been dotted by now with numerous high quality and well resourced specialised research and training institutions. No such development is in evidence. The Centre for African Regional Integration and Border Studies (CARIBS) of the University of Lagos, Nigeria, the first of its kind in any African tertiary institution, has recently suspended operation. Similarly, the African Regional Institute, Imeko, also in Nigeria, a privately registered research and training outfit with a vision and mission similar to CARIBS, is now faced with challenges of sustainability. The dream for African equivalents of specialised border studies establishments in Europe and North America remains far remote from realisation.

The way to specialized institutionalisation may become clearer if and when the African Union Border Programme Unit, domiciled in the daily bombardied Conflict Management Division of the constantly engaged Department of Peace and Security of the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa, is able to carry out a long-standing proposal for an inventory of relevant research and training institutions in Africa and recommend on strategies for improvement. Until such a time, we would have to depend on the kind of heroic efforts of individual scholars, such as those who have put together the edited volumes under review, located in different institutions in which African border and borderlands research interests. These are dispersed rather than consolidated into recognisable centres of excellence, distinctly or as integral parts of larger institutions.

Notes


3. Such institutions include the European University Institute, Florence, Italy; the Europa Institute, Edinburgh, U.K.; Institute of International Sociology, Gorizia, Italy; Institute of European Studies, Brown University, Providence, New York; Centre for Mexican American Studies, Austin, Texas; University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; Centre for Mexican Studies.


5. The eleven national case studies already published are Benin, 2006; Mali, Senegal and Niger, 2007; Cape Verde and Burkina Faso, 2008; Ghana, Togo, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire, 2009; and Nigeria, 2010.


In the last two decades, no other ideas have gained the totemic status that ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ have attained in global and African public politics and discourses. From Cambodia to Kenya, democracy and human rights were the rallying cries of the 1990s reform movements that have radically reshaped the politics of most African states. While redefined and rejected as Western impositions by many African leaders (many of them relics of the Cold War), the indifference of the voices for democracy and human rights were never in doubt, particularly among the victims of injustice and misrule in Africa.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that no matter how benign, ideas and concepts are always intertwined with power and the values of their promoters; that, indeed, every idea and concept, and even more so those which speak the language of liberation and freedom, should be subjected to critical analysis. This is the meaning of Isaa Shivji’s caution, long before the onset of the ‘Democracy and Human Rights’ in the 1990s, that the idea of human rights in Africa was not politically innocent (Shivji 1989: vii).

We need to dispense with a possible preliminary misconception, however. The approach of this paper is not a rejection of the well intentioned promotion of democracy and human rights in Africa by Western activists, academics or even states. Far from it. Indeed, the work of committed activists and ordinary Westerners who support groups such as Amnesty International can and should be repeated in many places in Africa, pro-democracy and human rights work has gained immensely form grants by Western governments.

However, democracy and human rights are promiscuous concepts, sometimes appropriated by the powerful and recruited for morally problematic ‘causes’. Good ideas can also end up serving bad ends when their theoretical deployment is not sufficiently rigorous. That is the problem with the recent work on democracy by Paul Collier, professor of economics at Oxford University. Collier’s Wars, Guns & Votes is troubling because it falls to a new extreme of some of the ideas that have steadily gained currency in international development and humanitarian discourses on Africa and the developing world (Collier 2009a).

Collier’s focus is what he calls the countries of the ‘bottom billion’, largely Sub-Saharan Africa and some Asian countries (Collier 2009a: 1). His argument is that these post-colonial countries are structurally more or less unaccountable. They lack social cohesion as they are too large to be nations and too small to efficiently produce basic goods such as security that are the responsibility of states (Collier 2009a: 9).

In Collier’s view, the experiment with democracy in these countries has failed and “[i]n promoting elections, the rich, liberal democracies have basically missed the point” (Collier 2009a: 49). He claims that “the international community” has assiduously promoted elections to merely drive these countries to a cul-de-sac of violence and insecurity that they cannot extricate themselves from. Collier’s prescription is, therefore, simple: the international community has to step in and take on the burden of providing and guaranteeing security for these countries. The international community can do this by investing more in international peacekeeping and intervening militarily. He concludes that the threat of military coups should be used against those leaders who steal elections and jeopardize democracy—what he unapologetically refers to as the harnassing of ‘the potent force of domestic violence for good’ (Collier 2009a: 231).

Collier’s book is important for several reasons. First, its author is a highly regarded international expert on development who is regularly called upon to advise international multilateral institutions that support African development. He is also professor of economics at Oxford University and the Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies, where he is producing the next generation of experts for Western foreign ministries and for international organizations. Moreover, therefore, proposals will come to influence events and policies in the developing world.

Second, it is important to address the arguments raised by Collier because they are part of a set of influential ideas on the question of the use of military force by the West for humanitarian purposes in the non-Western world. Because bad ideas have the tendency of contaminating good ones faster than the good ones can cleanse the bad, it is important that we inoculate ourselves against the ‘wrong’ ideas.

In 2000, a Canadian government-led initiative led to the constitution of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty to examine the dilemma posed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on the international community’s response to systematic and widespread human rights violations in the face of state sovereignty. The Commission, co-chaired by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and Special Advisor to UN Secretary General Mohammed Sahnoun coined and popularised the idea of ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001). In their argument, sovereign states have the primary responsibility to protect their citizens against catastrophe. In the event they are unable or unwilling to do so, however, the community of states has the responsibility to provide that protection.

Most policy and international affairs experts understood that argument to apply to contexts of mass slaughter or genocide, similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. In practice, however, the appetite for the use of Western military force to ‘do good’ in the developing world has been growing with new grounds for ‘humanitarian intervention’ being promoted in policy think tanks and academic circles.

What has come to be known as humanitarian intervention gained ascendancy in policy and academic circles in the West following NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The failure of the international community to decisively act to prevent the Rwanda genocide in 1994 has also heavily influenced the discussion surrounding the use of military force to ‘save strangers’ faced with the peril of genocide or mass slaughter.

‘Filtered through the language of morality and ethics, this new form of humanitarianism rejects any suggestion that it is imperialistic. In fact, Paul Collier, writing in the July/August 2009 issue of the Boston Review, has sharply rejected this criticism by fellow economist William Easterly of New York University that his advocacy of military intervention to ‘promote democracy’ in poor countries is not even ‘neo-colonialism’, but full-blown and old-fashioned ‘colonialism’ (Collier 2009b; Easterly 2009).

By speaking in the name of universal humanity, this military humanitarianism has allowed humanitarian and human rights actors, development experts and even old-fashioned empire-builders to find common cause in the use of the weapons of war in ‘rescuing’ others. It has also led to a conceptual shift in the principles of humanitarianism. Where, in the past, the humanitarian movement stressed its neutrality in contexts of armed conflict, certain sections of the humanitarianism movement now advocate the use of military force in the name of humanity. In fact, the earliest advocate of an international ‘right to intervene’ is Bernard Kouchner, the founder of the ‘humanitarian movement’ and current French Foreign Minister.

The ICRC was probably attacked for the reason the ICRC was targeted this time in the country since the days of the Iran-Iraq war (Forsythe 2005). The ICRC inherently contributed to the US’s strategic interest in West Africa to help shift the minds of the Iraq people, the ICRC inherently contributed to the US’s strategic objective of creating a new regime. Those carrying out the attacks most likely wanted chaos, disorder, insecurity – at least for a period. They were seeing foreign occupation before a new pro-western regime was secure. Probably for these same reasons, the head of CARE in Iraq was kidnapped by unknown persons in the fall of 2004 (Forsytye 2005: 99).

Most policy and international affairs experts understood that argument to apply to contexts of mass slaughter or genocide, similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. In practice, however, the appetite for the use of Western military force to ‘do good’ in the developing world has been growing with new grounds for ‘humanitarian intervention’ being promoted in policy think tanks and academic circles.

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Conor Foley, writing in the UK Guardian in May 2004, has noted that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, similar ‘humanitarian emblems’ designed to protect NGOs and other humanitarian actors, are now identified as ‘legitimate targets’ (Foley 2004). This has made the humanitarian agencies and the United Nations saw them as extensions of the American military mission.

Developments experts and humanitarian actors who continue to assume that their mission in such contexts is not serving the interests of intervening state only delude themselves. At the onset of the war in Afghanistan, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell provided NGOs as subcontractors to the US mission, noting that ‘NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our strategy that [we are] all committed to the same, singular purpose to help humankind…’ (Brauman and Salignon 2004: 269-70).

Even such an important actor as the Western powers who were the warmest supporters of the war in Iraq such as the Canadian scholar and politician Michael Ignatieff have concluded that the humanitarian governance imposed after intervention is ‘imperial because it requires imperial means: garrison troops and foreign civilian administrators, and because it serves imperial interests’ (Ignatieff 2003: 59).

Moreover, while the politics of human rights and humanitarian rescue
may be constructed in the language of shared humanity, the western-non-western moral encounters mask what human rights scholar Makau Mutua has called the genocide in an epochal context pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and savours, on the other.’ (Mutua 2001: 201). In this ‘savages-victims-saviors’ metaphor, the savages are the state or culture, its citizens the victims, with the western states, NGOs, activists and institutions as the savior. The metaphor involves the reduction of those rescued into flat, causal categories of object and sympathy, Mutua concludes.

A basic characteristic of the victim is powerlessness, an inability for self defense against the state or culture in question. The usual human rights narrative generally describes victims as hordes of nameless, despairing and dispiriting masses. To the extent that they have a face, it is desolate and pitiful. Many are uneducated, destitute, old and infirm, young, poorly clad, and or hungry. Many are peasants, the rural and urban poor, marginalized ethnic groups and nationalities, and lower castes, whose very life and freedom depend on the country’s civilization and a large distance from modernity (Mutua 2001: 229).

Humanitarian intervention coming to the ‘rescue’ of these powerless people is rarely cast as an arena of power but of morality. Yet ‘rescuing’ the ‘powerless’ also constructs the interveners as the ‘powerful’, the ‘good guys’ in their own eyes and in the eyes of the victims. It is a morality and power play that precludes any discourse of power and the political and historical implication of the interveners in the misery of the victims. On this play ground, Costas Douzinas writes:

Pity and a sense of superiority unite humanitarians. The massive pity engineered by humanitarian campaigns supports Western superiority, increases distanciation from its targets and breeds disdain. Pity联ed to a superiority to an inferior, it is the patronizing emotion of looking down at the person pitied. The human rights campaigner as rescuer联ed to an exterior is often a knee-jerk attempt to ignore or underplay the achievements by the African Union and other regional efforts in responding to African crises. Paul Collier, for instance, suggests that the British intervention in Sierra Leone war is the model for what the West can do for Africa, but ignores the intervention by African states. Likewise, he makes no mention of the South Africa-led Southern Africa Development Community’s intervention in Lesotho in 1998 to reverse a military coup. Of course, long before humanitarian intervention became fashionable, cultural and political dynamics of African conflicts into simple morality tales of good versus evil.

With regard to the 2007 contentious elections in Kenya, Collier concludes that ‘the evil of ethnicity inevitably led 98 per cent of Kenyans联ed to the vote for an ethnic kin, Raila Odinga (now Prime Minister in the coalition government), and likewise the Kikuyu to vote for incumbent Mwai Kibaki (now President) to a person. In his own words, all African countries, Kenya could not hold credible elections, not much should be expected of the rest of Africa (Collier 2009a: 203) Collier is not alone in viewing ethnicity as Africa’s destiny. Many analysts share the view that ethnicity is the basic identity of most Africans and not the nation-state. This is not to discount the fact that an ethnic group in its political understanding in Africa is to a considerable extent a product of the modern African state; that, for most Africans, the most relevant and salient political and social unit other than the family is likely to be the clan rather than the ethnic group. Ethnic groups gain relevance when they are recruited for political exclusion or competition for access to resources. In other words, ethnicity is actually a consequence rather than the cause of such political behaviour as voting.

The weakness here is that ethnicity is really a description and less of an explanation. While a commendable attempt to link academic analysis to policy, Collier’s policy prescriptions rest on rather shaky theoretical premises. The Western donor support to the democratic process and the rule of law in Africa does not necessarily yield positive results. This point has been eloquently argued by William Easterly, a World Bank economist. According to Easterly, Western aid ‘doesn’t have a great record on improving matters, on making governments do the right thing’ (Easterly 2006: 128). To succeed, democracy should not be imagined externally, as Collier does.

The argument here is not that there can never be grounds for outsiders to intervene in African countries to avert genocide or mass slaughter. The thinking sometimes informing the International Commission of Experts which popularised the ‘responsibility to protect’ is sound. African states have also gained important expertise and experience in creatively addressing war and violence on the continent. Unfortunately, there is often a knee-jerk ignorance to ignore or underplay the achievements by the African Union and other regional efforts responding to African crises. Collier, for instance, suggests that the British intervention in Sierra Leone war is the model for what the West can do for Africa, but ignores the intervention by African states. Likewise, he makes no mention of the South Africa-led Southern Africa Development Community’s intervention in Lesotho in 1998 to reverse a military coup. Of course, long before humanitarian intervention became fashionable, cultural and political dynamics of African conflicts into simple morality tales of good versus evil.

Edward Miguel of University of California at Berkeley concludes that Collier’s ‘premise that the poorest countries cannot grow ignores a decade of modest successes’ (Miguel 2009). To study Africa as though everything about its history is an unbroken catastrophe is not useful to African struggles for better governance, development and human rights. Surely, the democratizations struggles of the 20th Century are important indigenous developments. If Tanzania managed to forge a nation out of a diversity of its peoples, on what credible basis care resourcists can conclude that Africa’s diversity is its curse?

To prescribe the threat of military coups as a tool for enhancing good governance in Africa, as Paul Collier suggests, is to return the developing world to a past it is still struggling to free itself from. The military coup as a means of ascending into power is now discredit in Africa. The African Union has been emphatic on this. It is not a solution to disputed elections in Zimbabwe, Kenya or elsewhere. After the contentious 2000 presidential elections, the United States had to reach into the recesses of its own systems and institutions to rectify that problem. Curiously, Paul Collier is silent on whether a military coup should have been encouraged in the United States in 2000, as he proposes for cases such as Kenya’s 2007 elections. William Easterly makes the point succinctly. The West should not ‘reward bad governments by working through them but don’t to them what you would overthrow them either’ (Easterly 2006: 138). Between 2003 and 2009, Benin, Ghana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia all held successful and peaceful elections judged as free and fair by most observers. This point appears to be lost in Collier’s analysis.

The ascendency of the discourse on security which is often collapsed into development, as Collier does in his work, should also concern Africans and others in the developing world. While it is important to view security as a right that the state should guarantee, security is not the basis for all rights. The temptation to ‘securitize rights’ – to view all other rights and social needs through the lens of security – should be treated with caution (Lazarus and Goold 2007). Otherwise, in the name of protecting security, the developing world and Africa in particular will have opened itself up for military adventurism. States still act in their selfish interests in international affairs. Pure humanitarian motive is a good idea, but to act as though that idea is the reality is very unwise.

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Note
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Africa's Triple Quest
Garth Le Pere

The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War
by Adekeye Adebajo
Hurst & Company, 2010, 414 pages,

This prologue is important because it helps to frame the significance and path-breaking nature of this collection of essays. It begins by noting the discontents and substantively revised or substantially new nine of which have previously been published but which are now available in a single volume that is appropriately titled, ‘Black Berlin and the Curse of Fragmentation: From Bismarck to Barack’. It is a preface that makes the case that, in the context of Africa’s post-Cold War momentous changes, the role of Berlin is still relevant.

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The second part of this book is titled ‘The Quest for Hegemony’ and deals with the dynamics of Africa’s leadership styles and interests across a changing geo-strategic and geo-political landscape. It is divided into two chapters that examine the impact of different country actors. The first chapter deals with the impact of China, the second with the impact of the United States.

The first part of this book has three chapters. The second part of this book has two chapters. The first part of this book examines the concept of Africa’s international relations after the Cold War. The thematic organisation and analytical coverage of the book is as follows:

The book’s chapters fall under three parts: the Quest for Hegemony, the Quest for Unity, and the Quest for Pax Africana. The first part of the book has three chapters. The second part divides the book into two large sections. The third part examines the continent’s interface with the United Nations in the context of rising asymmetries between the rich and developed North and the poor and underdeveloped South (what the author terms ‘global apartheid’); and the fourth chapter provides a contrasting portrait of two very different African ‘faces’ of the UN, namely, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan. Hence, even by a cautious reading of the conceptual framework of institutions, an osmotic presence in the fabric of the UN, and two figures who tried to reshape the UN’s raison d’etre, Africa’s security dilemmas persist.

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United States, and France; Adeboje contemplates whether this trilogy make up an ‘axis of evil’, borrowing George Bush’s infamous phrase. The author, however, reserves his sharpest satire for France and its folie de grandeur ‘a charade of lost greatness’ as he puts it. This part concludes with Chapter 9 on the implications for Africa of South Africa’s increasingly close relationship with China. On the basis of their comparative footprints across a range of case studies, Adeboje suggests that the record is an ambiguous one, meaning that ‘... both Pax South Africana and Pang Sinica could come to represent a new breed of economic exploitation and political meddling in the affairs of others.’

The final part and its five chapters bring into stark relief the elusive but important quest for unity in Africa and the role played by certain personalities, institutions, and shifting systemic forces in advancing the Pan-African ideal. The antecedents of Nelson Mandela and Cecil Rhodes and their historical bequests are brought together as a ‘monstrous marriage’ in the Mandela Rhodes Foundation founded in 2002: one ‘a nation-builder par excellence’ and the other ‘an expansionist empire-builder’, one ‘An African Avatar’ and the other a ‘Colossal Imperialist’, in short, the incarnation of ‘Good vs. Evil’. Has the Foundation and the symbolism that it embodies taken the idea of reconciliation too far? (Chapter 10). The entire Chapter 11 is next devoted to Thabo Mbeki as Africa’s other philosopher-king, next to Kwame Nkrumah. The subtitle, ‘A Nkrumahist Renaissance’, is apt, for Mbeki strove to ‘... restore Africa’s past glory through his promotion of an African Renaissance’. And so Adeboje compares and contrasts these figures as the two main dramatis personae in Africa’s unity imperative and does so on the basis of the monarchical and prophetic traditions in African politics pioneered by Nkrumah. The metaphor of ‘Towers of Babel’ is most appropriate for an examination of the institutional and normative integrity of the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) and the moral enterprises of their visionary founding fathers: Adebayo Adeboje in the case of the former and Jean Monnet in that of the latter, both of whom provided the philosophical foundations for the respective evolutions of the AU and EU. These institutions very much represent the construction of heaven-reaching towers of unity interrupted by the confusion of tongues that make up their memberships (Chapter 12). In the penultimate chapter, Chapter 13, there is a serious attempt to search for the meaning of Barack Obama in terms of relations between America and Africa, crucially given his African ancestry and hope for a progressive front in forging a new African and American unity and identity. Sadly, it seems the euphoria of ‘Obamamania’ has given way to the realpolitik associated with the ‘Avuncular Sam’. The book attains a crescendo in the final Chapter 14, which shows how Africa and Asia as the ‘Heirs of Gandhi’ have changed the world. The Mahatma was a creature of the two universes and immortalised their struggles, very much incubating the idea of Afro-Asian solidarity and South-South cooperation that was forged in the crucible of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. However, this warm inductive promise of unity still has to do battle with the cold reality of Berlin’s curse. Ultimately, this is a very satisfying and important book and it is difficult to find major faults with it. While very well written, some might be put off by the overkill in rhetorical embroidery, mixed metaphors, and tendentious labelling of countries and personalities, but that is part of Adeboje’s oeuvre and allure, again imbued with the spirit of Mzrui. The book could also have been better rounded off with a final reflective and synthetic chapter that is forward-looking as much as the dynamic intersections of the various quests are concerned, including what this portends for the future of Africa. Moreover, notwithstanding a gold-mine of footnotes and given the book’s obvious importance for future scholarship and research, it could have used with a bibliography. However, it is decidedly superior in its conceptual organisation, substantive reach, analytical breadth, technical preparation, and depth of research; the footnotes alone take up sixty pages and the book has a most user-friendly and well-crafted index.

That said, this book is not only a fitting salutation to Ali Mazrui and an acknowledgement and celebration of the great keen Nelson Mandela and Cecil Rhodes in a manner way, it defines a new paradigmatic frontier in our understanding of Africa’s international relations by an African scholar who is as passionate as he is meticulous about his subject.

Of Tzitzis, Saints and Sinners
Assefa Bequele
Cutting for Stone
by Abraham Verghese
ISBN 9780099443636

Praise, a much loved nurse and a nun pregnant and was now in the throes of cataclysmic labour which was endangering both her life and her unborn twin babies. The story is narrated by one of the twins, Marion Stone, now 50 and a respected surgeon, to render some order to the events of his life and the mysteries that surrounded his birth, and to express his gratitude to his estranged twin brother Shiva for ‘the gift of yet another sunshine’. It is above all an effort to exercise old ghosts and heal old wounds. ‘Only the telling can heal the rift that separates my brother and me. Yes, I have an infinite faith in the craft of surgery, but no surgeon can heal the kind of wound that divides two brothers. Where silk and steel fail, story must succeed.’

The twin brothers were born at Missing Hospital, Addis Ababa, in the very room where their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, ‘spent most of her working hours, and in which she had been most fulfilled’. In a beautiful paragraph that is likely to be amusing and familiar to the Ethiopian ear and a darning but correct commentary on our cavalier attitude towards precision and attention to details, Marion tells us that ‘Missing was really Mission Hospital, a word that on the Ethiopian tongue came out with a hiss so it sounded like “Missing”.’ A clerk in the Ministry of Health who was a fresh high school graduate had typed out the MISSISSING HOSPITAL on the label, a phonetically correct spelling as far as he was concerned. A reporter for the Ethiopian Herald perpetrated the misspelling. When Marion first had approached the clerk in the ministry to correct this, he pulled out his original typescript. ‘See for yourself, madam. Quod erat demonstrandum it is Missing’, he said, ‘as if he’d proved Pythagoras’s Theorem, the sun’s central position in the solar system, the roundness of the earth, and Missing’s precise location at its imagined corner. And so Missing it was.’

Sister Mary Joseph Praise stayed and worked at Missing hospital in the presence of Thomas Stone, a respected British surgeon. The two were close and worked together in perfect harmony; they were ‘pure ballet’, ‘a heavenly pair’. But when his assistant of seven years, a young man, asked to see Marion, the Carmelite Order of Madras, unexpectedly went into labour, Thomas Stone, the man who everyone believed to be the father, didn’t know or suspect she was pregnant! But there she was, bleeding profusely and dying of child birth. When he, therefore, saw her lustreless eyes, her lips turned blue, in agony and quickly fading away, he was overwhelmed with fear of losing the woman he secretly loved. He ‘could feel the blood rushing through her name. From his lips, Sister Mary Joseph Praise’s name sounded like an interrogation, then an endangerment, then a confession of love spun out of one word. Mary? Mary, Mary?’

In spite of all their efforts, all the three physicians who lived and worked together at Missing Hospital – Stone, Dr Kalpna Hemlatha (Hema), and Dr Ghosh – were unable to save her. Stone was totally devastated. And, he who had been asking for her, who was not moved by the sight of the twins. In fact, he detested them and wouldn’t look at them. He left the room, run away, no one knew where, and was never heard from.

For Dr Kalpna Hemlatha, or, Hema as she was known, the death of Sister Mary Joseph Praise while giving life to these two infants was worse than tragic. It was madness, and the ‘only sensible response to the madness of life was to cultivate a kind of madness within’ and, in a scene reminiscent of Zorba the Greek, she started dancing and dancing and dancing ‘to the music
Abraham Vergese

Cutting for Stone

in her mind’. But she finally saw the beauty of having these two infants and said to herself that she had won ‘the lottery without buying a ticket’ and that ‘these two babies had plugged a hole in her heart that she didn’t know she had’. She became their mother. She named them Marion and Shiva, and ‘finally, reluctantly, almost as an afterthought, but because you cannot escape your destiny, and so that he wouldn’t walk away’. In fact, she added our surname, the name of the man who had left the room: Stone.’

Marion tells us of a warm and loving family and a happy childhood – he and Shiva falling asleep, ‘arms around each other, breathing on each other’s face, heads touching’, growing up with and like other Ethiopian and neighbourhood kids; enjoying the free and inclusive Ethiopian-Western social life; and exposed to culture and good education. All above they grew up very much loved, cherished, and totally decent as he was, he did not care at all about the life beyond, but lived in the now and present.

The Bunyan’s Hymn

The principal characters in this book are mostly a good and saintly group. These are people who are inspired by that sacred and holy spirit of motives and aspirations, perhaps best encapsulated in the ‘Bunyan’s Hymn’ which, we are told, Matron must have sung a thousand times to a dying friend and would-have-been-lover and husband. He who would valiant be ‘Gainst all disaster Let him in constancy Follow the Master. There’s no discouragement Shall make him once relent His first avowed intent To be a Pilgrim.

They are also an ambitious lot. There is Matron, an enduring inspiration and the one who advised Marion to go for the hardest thing he could possibly do, to make his life ‘something beautiful for God’ and not to settle for ‘Three blind mice’ when he can play Bach’s ‘Credo’. And there is also Hema, the woman he calls his mother, who decided early on in her life ‘to avoid the sheep life at all costs’.

The same commitment to a higher goal is reflected in Shiva. Otherwise unconventional in his attitudes and actions, Shiva devoted his life to serving the least wanted and most marginalised, instead of pursuing formal education in medicine like his brother. He was the embodiment of the secular saint. These kinds of inspired and saintly figures give the novel its unique moral compass.

The Cost of Forbidden Love

Faith is a highly personal matter and must be respected. Yet, one cannot help but wonder about the wisdom of aspects of it, for example celibacy which has led to many scandals that have befallen the high priests and retaliments of morality and caused damage to the lives of many; many young girls have been treated around the world. ‘Birth, Copulation and Death’ are common denominators. Nothing is more natural, and anything that ascribes sin to Sex is all too often a challenge to our being that almost inevitably leads to dissonant behaviour in our lives, as is told in this novel. Sister Mary Joseph Praise received her nursing pin and took the final vow of celibacy when she was only nineteen. Though undertaken at a young age, she had to live with the consequences of the vow, both in the respect and breach of it.

It was impossible for all involved that the everyday miracle of conception had taken place in the one place it should not have – the womb of a devout and much loved nun, one of their own, a bride of Christ! Even for the good and saintly Matron, who herself had lost her share of loss and missed fortunes to love and be loved, it was unthinkable that this pregnancy, ‘a mortal sin’, could take place.

It was the taking of the vow and the expected or assumed adherence to it which compromised their expectation and which was what was happening in front of their eyes. Even the secular Hema, an accomplished gynaecologist, was blinded to the obvious signs she would otherwise have detected. The celebrated virgin nun, above suspicion – she couldn’t possibly be in love with Thomas Stone, let alone be impregnated by him. But Hema could not help also reflecting on her blindness and blaming herself for it. It should have been up to her to see that Stone and the young nun were a perfect match; maybe if we’d encouraged them it could have been something more. How often did I see Sister assisting him in surgery, working on his manuscripts, taking notes for him in his outpatient department? Why did I assume that when he was away? I should have reached over and smacked him at my dinner table. I should have shouted at him: ‘Don’t be blind. See what you have in this woman! See how she loves you. Propose to her! Marry her. Get her to discard her habit, renew her vows. It is clear her first vow is to you, not to Thomas, I didn’t think so because we all assumed that you were incapable of anything more. Who knew that this much feeling was hidden in your heart? I see it now. Yes, now we have these two [the twins] as proof of what was in your hearts.’

It was proof of the tragic consequences of archaic moral standards and the denial of one’s sexuality. Sister Mary Joseph Praise’s death could have been avoided. As Hema says to Thomas Stone, while trying desperately to save her, ‘One prenatal visit? Could you have let me see her for at least one prenatal visit? … Look at the soup we are in Right now: Completely avoidable…completely avoidable’. The Problem with Fathers

Of all the characters in this book none is as committed as committed the fate and wellbeing of the twins and as blunt with the truth and Thomas Stone as Hema, the adoptive mother of the twins. And none is as intriguing and conflicted as when Hema confronted him, ‘Please get them out of my house’. Hema, her husband, and even by the embittered son, Marion, to explain and excuse Stone’s behaviour. For Ghosh, Thomas Stone was a good surgeon who ‘had no understanding of life’; he had lost his parents when he was a child and was terrified that if he got too close to anyone he would hurt him or he would hurt them.

What ever explanation, the fact that Stone did not try to contact Hema and Ghosh and find out about the fate of his sons even after having established himself as a leading and highly respected surgeon and long after the twins were born is an inexcusable act of omission. Even Ghosh, who was the most sympathetic and understanding of the three, says that he had after all expected Stone to contact him and was disappointed that he did not do so. Though this is not the place for a discussion of gender differences in parliament, one cannot help but wonder as to how the mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, might have responded had she been faced with a somewhat similar situation or opportunity. Would she have abandoned her twin sons? Would she have been totally indifferent to their situation if she had the same set of circumstances? The chance of success that Stone had in later years? We would never know, of course, but we can guess what the answer might be.

The Beautiful Life

One of the striking features of Vergese’s engaging book is how likeable and manifestly decent his characters are, something which normally wouldn’t be a good recipe for tension and momentum in a novel. They are also supremely wise – unpretentious, down-to-earth and appreciative of the simple life. They have none of the existential doubts or the insatiable needs that make our affluent lives so unnecessarily miserable.
Take, for instance, Hema, the twins’ adoptive mother, devoted wife and saviour of many lives.

She’d been kept busy from her first day. If the truth be known, she secretly rekindled the emergencies, the situations and the drama, sometimes even her foul mouth, where the seconds ticked off, where a mother’s life hung in the balance, or in a baby in the womb, desperate to save the two of them. A mother, a wife, a daughter, was suddenly none of these things, boiled to a human being in great danger…

These were committed humanists who saw meaning in service. Or take Dr Ghosh, Hema’s husband and the twins’ adoptive father. Ghosh, a lecher who loved his drinks and women and yet turned into a dotting husband and devoted father, was immensely appreciative of each day: ‘Another day in paradise’ – his frequent pronouncement when he settled his head on his pillow. Like Maurice in Tuesday’s with Morrie, he says ‘the uneventful day was a precious gift’. ‘The key to happiness’, Ghosh tells us, ‘is to own your slippers, own who you are, own how you look, own your family, own the talents you have, and own the ones you don’t.’ If you keep saying the slippers aren’t yours, then you will die searching, you will die bitter, always feeling you were promised more’. This indeed happened to Genet, Marion’s great love and his source of misery and unhappiness; she’d died chasing greatness and never saw it each time it was in her hand, so she kept seeking it elsewhere, but never understood the work required to get it or keep it.

The Perfection of Life and of Work

A common narrative in our modern age is the tension between work and life or work and the family. This is a real challenge in daily life that is directly addressed in this novel. Marion, as we see earlier, is an intellectual, and advises the young Martron to play his Gloria and to go to the height of his possibilities. He found his purpose in life by being a physician. Similarly, Hema, his mother, was of the same caste of mind; her ambition was to avoid the sheep life or vice versa. It is a meeting of both. In this story, the best example of the fusion of the perfection of life and work are Ghosh and Hema, both successful in their profession, very much enduring to each other, and successful parents. Unfortunately, that path and destiny is only for the few; the vast majority can only envy them; and those who achieve it can only be grateful for their good luck and good fortune.

Of Ethiopians and Indians

On a personal level, the story resonates with Ethiopians of my generation for several reasons. There are, of course, the familiar events that form the backdrop to the story - the Haile Selassie period which in hindsight was arguably amongst the most glorious in Ethiopian history. This is especially true against him which saw the beginning of the end; the long, bloody fratricidal war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, ultimately resulting in the amputation of our country and so on. But there are two other aspects to this book that make it endearing for Ethiopians, other than the moving story and the way it is narrated.

The first is the Indian connection. Many of us of the Haile Selassie generation were produced of Indian teachers or doctors. In those days, most of the few free-government elementary and secondary schools were run or staffed by Indian teachers from the Christian Indian state of Kerala.

Ask an Ethiopian abroad if perchance they learned mathematics or physics from a teacher named Karim or Vargese, Thomas, George, and the odds are their eyes will light up. These teachers were brought up in the Orthodox ritual where they learned Newton’s laws into the brains of their Ethiopian students; the tell-tale engraving the multiplication and periodic tables as well as Kepler’s laws into the brains of their Ethiopian pupils, who were uniformly smart and who had a good aptitude for mathematics.

So the Ethiopian affection for India is both apparent and incontestable. Similarly, the love Marion feels for his birth country is palpable and moving. No ferjenji novel has arguably written about Ethiopia with as much love, delicacy, and passion as Abraham Vargese does through his Marion, the narrator. Geography brought him there, and he embraced his destiny in a manner that converted fate into a meaningful life of giving. His descriptions of the beautiful country, the Ethiopians’ peaceful and kind nature, the both kindness and violence, the arbitrariness of justice and of power that has been the hallmark of our history to this day and the heart-wrenching pain of exile are unsurpassed literary works.

Vargese’s feelings are echoed through many of his characters. Marion, the narrator, smells Ethiopia wherever he goes – ‘the faint scent of charcoal and the frankincense that permeates [every Ethiopian woman’s] clothes’. And perhaps the most colourful character, also described as dooriy or lecherous, is struck by the natural beauty of the land, now seriously threatened and undermined by its inhabitants’ callous and indifferent abuse of their habitat, and the conflicted Ethiopian psyche. ‘My greatest consolation,’ Ghosh thought, for only the hundredth time since his arrival in Ethiopia, ‘has been the women of this land’. This country had completely surprised him. Despite pictures he had seen in National Geographic, he had been unprepared for this mountain empire shrouded in mist. The cold, the altitude, the wild roses, the towering trees, reminded him of Coonoor, a hill station in India he had visited as a boy…

Their [Ethiopians’] sharp, sculpted noses and soulful eyes set them between Persians and Africans, with the kinky hair of the latter, and the lighter skin of the former. The former, unusually fair-skinned, were often morose, they were quick to anger, quick to imagine insults to their pride. As for the concept of conspiracy and the most terrible penury, surely they’d stoned the world market on those. But get past all those superficial attributes, and you found people who were supremely intelligent, loving, hospitable, and generous.

The observant Ghosh in a sharp dig at Ethiopians, further tells us of a people interested in ‘getting their shoes shined more often than they bathe’.

And there is the ever present shadow of fear, injustice and abuse of power that is at the heart of Ethiopia’s social, economic and political fabric. We see this in a brief but illuminating incident involving Gosh, who was arrested and taken to Alem Bekagne (Kercche – then, and for long after the central prison in the country – apparently our very own version of the police of the United States). The country had completely surprised him. Despite pictures he had seen in National Geographic, he had been unprepared for this mountain empire shrouded in mist. The cold, the altitude, the wild roses, the towering trees, reminded him of Coonoor, a hill station in India he had visited as a boy…

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But Thomas Stone did not agree. He was convinced that ‘he had found the cure and he’d found it himself. Ross had it wrong, or so Thomas thought; perfection of the life came from perfection of the work’. Work was all that mattered; ‘it was his meat, his drink, his wife, his child, his politics, his religion…until the day he found himself seated…in the room of a child he had abandoned; only then did he admit to his son how completely work had failed.’

And so, what or which is the right path? ‘It’s obviously not one or the other. Nor is the path linear – from the perfection of the work to the perfection of the life or vice versa. It is a meeting of both. In this story, the best example of the fusion of the perfection of life and work are Ghosh and Hema, both successful in their profession, very much enduring to each other, and successful parents. Unfortunately, that path and destiny is only for the few; the vast majority can only envy them; and those who achieve it can only be grateful for their good luck and good fortune.

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Even so, Marion’s love and loyalty never wavered. Soon after Ghosh was released, he once overheard him and his wife contemplating taking the family somewhere else (Persia or Zambia), before another attempted coup. Marion was not amused: ‘Were they joking? This was my country they were talking about, the land of my birth, its potential for violence and mayhem had been proven. But it was still home. How much worse would it be to be tortured in a land that wasn’t your own?’ He continues:

Call me unwanted, call my birth a disaster, call me a blemish, a relic of a disgraced nun and a disappeared father, … but the loamy soil that nurtured Marion’s roses was my flesh. I said Ethyo-pya, like a native. Let those born in other lands speak ofEthyo-op-ee-ya, as if it were a compound name like Sharm el Sheikh, or Dur el Jamat Eireann. The Entoto mountains disappearing in darkness framed my horizon; if I left, those mountains would sink back to the ground, or be transformed into nothingness; the mountains needed me to gaze at their tree-filled slopes, just as I needed them to be certain I was alive. The canopy of stars at night; that, too, was my birthright. A celestial gardener sowed meskel seeds so that when the rainy season ended, the leaves would be in its welcome. Even the Drowning Soil, the foul-smelling quick sand behind Missing, which had swallowed a horse, a dog, a man and God knows what else – I claimed that as well…All possibilities resided within me, and they required me over here. If I left, what would be left of me? But, sadly, he had to. He went on exile because of a suspicion that he was part of a conspiracy in a political/criminal act committed by Genet, the girl he always loved. Those years of exile were years of painful memories, playing and singing in his mind, the mournful, melancholic and haunting Ethiopian song, Tizita.

Tizita

Tizita is almost certainly the most beloved of Ethiopian songs. There is no English equivalent that captures the meaning of Tizita. Abraham Verghese translates it to mean ‘memory tinged with regret’, which is almost correct. But it is more than that. In its simplest form it means memory, or memory of one’s love, or of a turbulent love affair, a longing for one’s lover, even for his/her anger and irritating behaviour. You sing it when you are happy and when
you are sad, or when you are in love and out of love. You listen to it in the comfort of your sofa, but you are also as likely to waltz on the floor with the one you love. You sing it in the familiar surroundings of your native land, but especially when and if you are banished to exile. It is mostly melancholic but it can sometimes be fast. It is a very unusual song which speaks to the Ethiopian psyche and soul. It is in the end about remembrance of things past in all their manifestations.

It grows with and on you and stays with you for ever. And so it does with Marion, the Ethiopian/Indian. ‘After lunch, Shiva and I fall asleep, arms around each other, breath on each other’s face, heads touching. In that fugitive state between wakefulness and dreaming, the song I hear is … Tizita’, he says. It is the song he hears through all his years in Ethiopia, the one he carries with him whenever and wherever he goes, and the one he bequeaths during his years of exile in America.

There are various versions of Tizita – for example, those of Bezawork Asfaw, Rahel Yohannes, Getachew Kassa, and Mahmoud Ahmed. As Verghese says, ‘every Ethiopian artist records a Tizita’. They record it in Addis Ababa, but also in exile in Khartoum and of course in Rome, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, and New York. ‘Tizita’ is the heart’s anthem, the lament of the diaspora. ‘It is therefore not surprising that the first thing Marion carried in his bag upon leaving suddenly his house is the bag which had the slow and fast Tizita, and it was Tizita cassettes that were among his precious possessions and a connection to his land of birth. Tizita is the symphony that plays throughout the story, and Verghese, in an appropriate tribute, devotes a whole chapter to it.

The Return

In a replay and yet another confirmation of the American dream, Marion’s stay in America was successful and satisfying professionally. He was also able, during this stay, to reconnect and exercise the potentially destructive spell of his beloved, who nearly caused his death, but not for the miraculous intervention of Shiva. The end was both tragic and uplifting, resulting in feelings of longing and gratitude. ‘Twin brothers, we slept in the same bed till our teens, our heads touching, our legs and torsos angled away. We were partners in memory and proximity, but I still long for it, for the proximity of his skull. When I wake to the gift of yet another sunrise, my first thought is to rouse him and say, “I owe you the sight of morning.”’

Marion returns to his Ethiopia to work alongside Hema, his devoted mother, at Missing Hospital. ‘Born in Africa, living in exile in America, then returning last at all to Africa, I am proud that geography is destiny. Destiny has brought me back to the precise coordinates of my birth, to the very same operating theatre where I was born.’

A Beautiful Novel with the Wrong Title

This is a sensitive, often elegiac book with a well-constructed and engaging plot and full of vivid characters. The title is taken from the Hippocratic Oath but remains a poor and unconvincing choice that fails to do justice to the underlying themes and to the story beautifully told in this book. Although he sometimes tells us about things he couldn’t possibly remember or know, Marion the narrator does a good job of describing the events and the personalities that shaped his life, and does so with respect and balance, without making them persons ‘neither of superlative goodness nor repellent wickedness’.

Minorities and Majorities

This is a novel which should reach a much wider audience than would otherwise be through an American or UK edition. It is of manifest interest to an audience in Ethiopia, where much of the action takes place. But it would be of equal appeal to the wider African audience or to minorities within and outside Africa. It serves as a counterpart to the conventional narrative on the relationship between minority groups and indigenous majorities, and speaks of the rich and intense interrelationships between them. More importantly, it is a moving eulogy and testament that love of country and love of a woman can transcend ethnicity and cultural barriers. It is an alternative and uplifting antidote to the real or imagined grievances about the parochialism of Asians in Eastern Africa and the racist policies that it ostensibly triggered or justified in Amin’s Uganda.

The Writer as a Moralist

Early on in the book, Marion shares with us in a deeply moving and philosophical way his reflections on the flow and flood of life, more precisely his life, the piercing losses that shaped the very beginnings and last phase of his life, and the nostalgia, sentimentalism and wisdom that elusive memory bestows on the past. We live and act in the present, without the benefit of hindsight to judge whether our actions and decisions are right or wrong, he concludes. Says Marion: ‘You live forward, but understand it backward. It is only when you stop and look to the rear that you see the corpse caught under your wheel.’ But, having returned to his country of birth, he also sees ‘in the African night’ the many ordinary miracles of life, grateful for the privilege of yet another sunrise and the life of service to the people he loved and that needed him most.

Abraham Verghese is a manifestly passionate observer and lover of Ethiopia, warts and all. This book is a moving and memorable evocation and confession of love to his Ethiopia. We are however told in the inside cover this writer of obviously great moral values now lives and teaches in the United States. This last piece of information is a minor detail, but it raises a big ethical question.

Clearly, the aim of good literature is not to pontificate on religious, social or political dogma. It is to reflect life in its varied facets, to make people happy or sad and experience and even dream life in its infinite ways. So, the author should not be constrained by a social or political agenda or expectation. Yet, the reader cannot help being unsettled by the dissonance between, on the one hand, the book’s moving conclusion where the narrator and principal character, Marion, resists the temptation to stay in America and returns to serve in a somewhat primitive hospital in his Ethiopia and, on the other hand, the knowledge that the author of this inspiring book is not where one would expect him to be but has a post as professor of medicine at the highly respected Stanford University, California. Is it too much to ask, Abraham, why only Marion? And what in the world are you doing there?

Notes


2 Amharic for ‘foreigner’.

Celebrating a Knight of Clio: Robin Law and the Merry-Go-Round of Atlantic Africa

Anselme Guezo


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ince the celebration a few decades ago of the life and work of Raymond Mauny, African historians have routinely witnessed, almost every decade, from the busy schedule of their daily occupation to pay homage to one of the best among them. Robin Law’s is the latest in an already impressive string of celebrations dotting memory signposts the tortuous path leading to the growth of an authentically African approach to history. But, even though, by the standards of earlier events of the kind, Robin Law may look like a rather young man, this does not affect in the least the meanings traditionally assigned to such congregations of university dons: first, to take stock of the progress so far made by African historians in a particular field of research, and secondly, to draw a road map for future scholarship. Nevertheless, the dilemma facing scholars on such occasions is whether to be forward-looking or backward-looking in the assessment of the contribution of their illustrious colleague. Indeed, depending on the age of the hero of the day, it proves very difficult to strike the right balance between these two approaches. Unfortunately, the presence of a sound figure of an elderly professor may easily sway his colleagues into indulging in hubris eulogy as they vie with one another in praise for the past achievements of an obviously declining star. On the contrary, the celebration of a teacher in mid-career has none of this inhibition. Rather than closing a chapter, it is a prospective exercise circumventing clearly the challenges still lying ahead. This is the task of a serious relationship between communities, a perusal of this voluminous festchrift in honor of Robin Law, combining harmoniously it does retrospection and prospect in a balanced picture.

But let no one be deceived by the relatively young age of Robin Law. He deserves as much as all his predecessors who underwent the same rite to take his rightful place among the founding fathers of the mighty discipline that African history has become today. Indeed, he has greatly contributed to the growth of this branch of human inquiry of which he became a devotee at the tender age of twenty-seven. Robin Law’s long presence in the field has turned him both into an astute student of West Africa and a privileged eye-witness of its recent history; incidentally, he lived in Nigeria throughout the duration of the civil war in the late sixties. This fact explains the range of topics covered in this book as well as the diversity of background of its contributors.

‘The changing worlds of Atlantic Africa’ is indeed a very fat book both in terms of content and detail. With its 513 pages, it stands as a vivid testimony of the scope and depth of Robin Law’s...
that the living conditions of the Africans under state-controlled institutions were no different from those of the Africans in stateless societies.

African states, on the other hand, had the tendency of adopting negatively the settlement pattern in a given region by causing the emergence of a periphery on their mainland. It is thought that raising their weaker neighbors with the firearms supplied by their European trading partners, the African states eventually pushed the latter into the mountainous recesses and inhospitable resorts. If states played such a limited and negative role in the development of the market, how then can one account for the procurement of export slaves? Some of the contributors to this collection suggest that the imbalance between center and periphery which resulted from trade expansion was enough to destabilize less organized societies. It is said that the populations became vulnerable to food shortage. They lay great emphasis on the role of kinship in the expansion of trade network. It would appear that it was through the channel of family alliances and trade networks that commodities against which were exchanged the millions of Africans were conveyed. Trade also served as a conduit for the transfer of the techniques and knowledge of the populations living in the centers to the communities in the peripheries. Hence the necessity to bring under closer scrutiny these two pillars of any African society: kinship and trade.

The Omani aristocracy of the Arabian peninsular allied heavily with the networks to sustain their hegemony over the centuries and accumulate wealth which they lavishly displayed in conspicuous consumption. Trade was a conduit for the transfer of the techniques and knowledge of the populations living in the centers to the communities in the peripheries. Hence the necessity to bring under closer scrutiny these two pillars of any African society: kinship and trade.

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Here again, pawns were not immune to sale until and unless the debt was paid. One can, therefore, assert that a substantial number of slaves were the hapless victims of the kinship system. Others were, however, indirectly produced by the breakdown of this system, especially when faced by a subsistence crisis which eventually led to famine and wars. Viewed from a legal institution's perspective, the supply side of the Atlantic slave trade appears to be fully integrated into a system of transfer of full ownership and knowledge subsequent to the expansion of the market into the interior of the continent. It was this well-oiled mechanism that Abolition brought to an abrupt end. It remains to be proven whether this momentous event was equally beneficial to the three sides of the famous triangular commerce.

Many of the contributors to this book have tried to assess the impact of Abolition in the economic development of the three continents involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Thus, in contradistinction to all the predictions of economic slump likely to follow Abolition, this decision ushered in Europe an era of tremendous growth in all sectors of the economy. This prosperity was measured in such extent that most African economies were unable to cope with the changes. It may not be amiss to assert that Abolition paved the way to the industrial revolution, in which Britain took a very decisive lead. The other European powers, which at first did not feel bound by the British decision to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and thus did not follow suit, also reaped some profit from the withdrawal of their British competitors.

Spain, for instance, welcomed the British slave traders and sailors into the country, and these latter continued to operate under a different European flag. In this way, they proved instrumental in transferring to their new Spanish employers all the technologies and knowledge of the African slave trade for another half a century. As far as France was concerned it took advantage of Britain's official withdrawal from business to expand its own sugar industry, mostly by attracting British financial support towards its enterprise and other financial perks. On the American side of the triangle, the conclusions that one can draw about Abolition are in the nature of things much more tempered. Here, the color bar was skillfully manipulated so as to keep blacks away from any benefits which may accrue to them from the new dispensation arising from Abolition. On the contrary, the white settler communities who were by then fully integrated in the local economy of the continent were given free range to accumulate capital and invest in other industries. They were, therefore, poised to seize control of the colonial economies by becoming the new property-owning bourgeoisie of Cuba and Brazil. Meanwhile, the most enterprising among their black fellow citizens had to struggle against all odds to keep their heads above water.

The new world in which freed slaves found themselves proved to be very inimical to black business which had no leeway except in the gray area between legality and illegality. This is very well illustrated by the case study of a black liberated slave in post-Abolition Brazil. As this essay shows, the white settler authorities tolerated the gainful activities of the blacks as long as there were not any political repercussions at excluding them from a particular economic sector. Thus, in Brazil, the establishment of the saving banks finally pushed into illegality the Yoruba traditions of saving and investing among the black Brazilians. Another gray area in this country was the candumbe confraternities which were frowned upon by many, even though they were tolerated by some well-connected white businessmen to use them. This situation exposed the priests of this cult to legal harassment and prosecution at any time the authorities might decide to do so. On the whole, if there was any change in the life of liberated slaves in Brazil, it was in the fact that some of them have been able to use the profits accumulated from their business venture in acquiring farm lands and in establishing the circle of their clients. The same attitude prevailed among so-called Abolition merchant princes on the African coast.

Given this background, it is a misnomer to speak of an economic revolution, as far as Africa, the third side of the metaphoric triangle, was concerned. Even though Abolition in Africa is widely praised as the harbinger of change on the continent, this must be taken with a pinch of salt. A very stimulating study of a Lagosian businessman convincingly proves that the Blacks, when given equal opportunities, evince the same foresight as their white counterparts in matters of detecting promising fields of capital investment. However, the big stick of colonialism was always there to beat them out of sight. In the end, this typical Lagosian businessman had no space left for him by the colonial system except extending credit and developing his own palm oil production, the only way of the banks which would complete the job of his exclusion from the economic arena of Lagos. One can draw a parallel here between the plight of this businessman and the fortunes of the blacks in post-Abolition Brazil. But even more interestingly, this description of the situation in the mid-nineteenth century sounds like a premonition when set against the predicament in which contemporary Nigerians find themselves.

Today, the same Lagosians had very little room for manoeuvre outside registering as mules or couriers in the bruising drug trade. The lesson of the story is that capitalism entertains no morality when its interests are at stake. Likewise, this is the message conveyed by a study which evoked the antics played by BP Shell in the pursuit of their own interests. The management of this society did not shrink from siting on a fence throughout the centuries rather than taking the costly decision of siding with one of the two belligerents. Given all these counter-examples it would be difficult to adhere to the
conclusion that Africans were the sole beneficiaries of Abolition. Indeed, such a conclusion is based on a careful analysis of the growth of the market economy throughout the four periods of African economic history: Africa before the advent of the Portuguese, Africa during the Atlantic slave trade, Africa in transition and colonial Africa.

In the light of this argument, the vibrant economy before the sixteenth century fueled by an autonomous development of exchange between the areas of West Africa was suddenly brought to a halt after the inception of the Atlantic slave trade. This outward-looking activity eventually stilled all the indigenous industries of the continent. The precious commodities that were highly acclaimed by the first European traders to the extent that they put themselves forward as middlemen in their exchange, gradually lost in quality and were replaced by European manufactures. Therefore, the Atlantic slave trade contributed very little to the growth of the market economy. It rather shrank into insignificance internal demand through its decimation of the continent’s population. The opposite was true in its wake. The long period heralded by the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by ‘legitimate’ commerce, many African enterprises responded to the demand of the market by expanding their business. Even though this demand came mainly from international trade, the profit percolated into the internal market pursuant to the rule of the surplus theory.

For instance, in certain regions of the continent such as Hausaland, land became so valuable as to be privately owned. These developments, which were formulated into the theory of ‘adaptation crisis’ by Professor Henige,15 perhaps led to a change of leadership in some of the major African polities and, ultimately, to the colonial conquest of the African continent. However, it would seem that one would be hard-pressed for evidence of any sort for this transition. More often than not, there was no radical change either in the political leadership or in the economic field. The common pattern was that, after the abolition, the native aristocracy simply extended control over the natural resources still lying idle and established a rent-based economy not unlike the previous exchange of human resources.

As far as plantations were concerned, they were really few and far between. In the Oil Rivers as in the hinterland of Poro Abolition, the native aristocracy simply extended control over the natural resources still lying idle and established a rent-based economy not unlike the previous exchange of human resources.

The essay on Igbominaland gives a tentative answer to this question. It described the process of expansion and decline of the family ideology in this periphery of the Oyo Alafinate.16 It is evident that this kind of family ideology was never accepted by the European traders despite the fact that it was a better system of family ideology than the slave-raiding mode of production, which may be applied directly to the Atlantic slave trade, if not Dahomey.

But it is baffling to realize that an historian of the talent of Robin Law should also find it necessary to coin his own exotic concept: revolution of destruction.22 For him the rise of Dahomey in the area of the Slave Coast wreaked havoc and desolation on the previously well organized Aja states which had to bear the brunt of it. Dahomey did not own slaves for slave trade. This interpretation is not original as such. It is entirely dependent on arguments culled from the writings of the Abolitionist authors of the nineteenth century. The opposite view was also that historians were the major protagonists in the debate. What failed to explain is why a revolution of destruction could have lasted for about one hundred and sixty-seven years, that is, from 1824 to 1891, when the French conquered Dahomey.

In reality, the closest that one can get to a revolution of destruction in the recent history of the Slave Coast was the relatively short episode of the Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin (1993) for the conquest of Ouidah by Abou Bakr in 1727 to the French conquest of Dahomey in 1894.

On the whole, the written material on which this history is based appears flimsy both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, this deficiency may be corrected one day by the chance discovery of a new store of evidence, as suggested by David Henge. Where the onus lies is on the quality side, simply because, according to him, historians are firmly in the grip of their Zeitgeist, which keeps them enthralled to a particular vision of the world. Indeed, despite all their effort, European historians are not any more successful in writing about the Atlantic slave trade. Dominination is an infectious disease which affects to the same degree masters and slaves. That is why no matter how hard European historians may try, they cannot free themselves from the ghost of colonialism which causes their writings to be constantly buffeted between the Charibdis of exoticism and the Scylla of ethnography. I will use two examples to illustrate this position.

The exotic literature which is aimed at a European audience purports to paint the world in sharp contrast so as to raise the consciousness of the European elite. Its objective has never been to study alien cultures in their own right but with the view of what Europe can learn from them. Caricature is, therefore, the most suitable literary device to make sense of the educational goal of castigare ridendo mores. That is why the process of ‘discovery’ and conquest of Africa is usually discussed in terms of the activities of the European traders who were liable to jail, even by many Africans is still a powerful deterrent to many a native scholar to openly engage the issue.

But even when they are bold enough to open this controversial field of study, they often produce a tepid and biased rendition of this tragic episode of their history. Expatriate historians do not labor under any such handicap. They can freely apply their intellectual acumen to uncover all the unspoken aspects of the Atlantic slave trade. This is exactly what Robin Law did when he generously collected and edited the writings of former slave traders. But it is also a matter of fact that the literature on which this book draws heavily was written after the abolition and the slave-raiding mode of production are applied directly to the Atlantic slave trade, if not Dahomey.

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understand that there was only a difference of degree and not of kind between Dahomean rule in Ouidah and French colonial rule there? If the answer to this last question is yes, then are we not facing a subtle attempt to justify colonialism posthumously?

Presumably, even in the expression of their empathy for Africa, the European historians cannot help being selective. They are unable to see the continent as a whole because they are trapped in the Manichean world view of colonialism. Here Robin Law openly takes sides with those he considers to be the victims of the Atlantic slave trade. In perhaps the most brilliant piece in this collection of essays, Professor Tom McCaskie, on the contrary, did not conceal his sympathy with the former perpetrators, whose descendants form the Kumasi-based Ghanaian elite and of which President Kufuor is a member. With tremendous dexterity of narrative and considerable mastery of twi, he mingles oral and written sources to come up with a comprehensive genealogy that fully justifies, historically, the president’s claims to political leadership. But while it is a very convincing account of the historical background to the rise of the two political traditions which compete today for the exercise of power in Ghana, his analysis appears a little bit reductionist and tends to exonerate colonialism in the establishment of this artificial bi-polarization of the country’s political scene.

Yet it is known that it is the rent economy fostered by colonialism on the backs of the Ghanaian masses that entrenched the wealth, exhibited today by the so-called bourgeoisie, as passport to political power. Elsewhere in Africa, where there were no proven natural resources, colonialism did not lend its support to traditional rule. If it did at all, it was for reasons other than the promotion of any modern African elite. In any case, to what extent is an elite whose members have to underwrite their credentials by British universities still regarded as representative of the African peoples whose political experience it pretends to summarize? But Professor McCaskie sees no prospects for Ghana’s political future beyond the ‘democratic’ transfer of power between these two traditions.

For him, this is the sole condition to ensure the continuation of Western financial support. This is exactly the mirage of development against which Kwame Nkrumah, the founder of the second tradition, was warning the Ghanaians about in his writings. But this limitation of the political debate to the Western-educated elite keeps out of the picture the overwhelming majority of Ghanaians still sharing their African cultural heritage. This presence of the African culture is conspicuous, though in the role kinship played in shaping the psyche of the elite on both sides of the divide. Family ties determine largely the rules of the political game as could be seen in the elegant description by McCaskie of the socialization of the members of the elite. Indirectly, he is pointing the way to bridging the gap between these two competing traditions, which must reconcile with their African heritage.

To go through these essays is a highly rewarding exercise. One comes out of it a little dizzy as one would from a merry-go-round. African historians deserve this timely distraction even if this means returning to reality with a deep sense of unfulfilled expectations. I would recommend this book as the latest compendium on the Atlantic slave trade after correction of the numerous grammatical mistakes which are an eyesore to its majestic tapestry.
résultats de cette étude sont révélateurs d’un modèle camerounais émergent d’accompagnement entrepreneurial à forte prégnance du capital petite et petite entreprise africaine dont l’insertion dans des réseaux sociaux de proximité constitue une stratégie forte de contournement des (famille, amis, tontines, réseaux de proximité) dans l’activité de ces promoteurs. Cette réalité camerounaise confirme la particularité de la très scolarisation élevé, forte expérience dans le secteur d’activité, rôle déterminant de l’engagement personnel des promoteurs ain si que des le Groupe National de Travail (GNT) Cameroun du Conseil pour le Développement de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales en Afrique (CODESRIA).


Décentralisation et gouvernance locale

Appropriation des instruments de la fiscalité : élaboration du budget de la commune rurale de Kalabancoro

Moussa Diaye, Anandou Ousia, Rokia Traoré Dembéllé

Avec la gestion de proximité, les ressources ont été transférées aux communes. Ceci leur permet de prendre en charge leur fonctionnement et d’assurer leur entraînement. Seulement, les ressources dont une commune peut disposer peuvent paraître insuffisantes si les besoins ne sont pas hiérarchisés dans l’optique de lui apporter une solution appropriée. C’est ainsi que les collectivités territoriales ont la possibilité d’établir des priorités dans la résolution des problèmes. Les ressources sont destinées à alimenter le budget de chaque commune (emprunts, subventions de l’État, impôts et taxes) pour subvenir aux besoins de fonctionnement et au développement. Donc, la gestion de ces ressources doit naturellement se faire dans la logique des principes de la décentralisation et de ceux de la comptabilité publique à travers les différentes structures en charge de la question. La décentralisation postulant la responsabilisation des communes, celles-ci doivent mettre l’accent sur la mobilisation des ressources fiscales pour ne pas continuer à dépendre des ressources venant d’autres acteurs comme l’État et les partenaires techniques et financiers. C’est donc la question de la gouvernance de la décentralisation qui est interpellée et qui requiert l’implication de toutes les composantes de la commune pour une mobilisation effective des ressources et de leur utilisation judicieuse. Tout ceci se pose en termes de défis que doivent relever les collectivités territoriales, notamment les communes. La présente étude se propose d’analyser ce processus à travers l’exemple de la commune rurale de Kalabancoro.

Contextes locaux des conflits et de la reconstruction de la paix

Migration et tensions sociales dans le sud du Mali

Bakary Camara, Bakary F. Traoré, Bréma E. Dicko, Moro Sidibé

Suite au phénomène de l’appauvrissement des populations, la rareté des terres cultivables et la manipulation des élites politiques et intellectuelles, la crise ivoirienne a éclaté le 19 septembre 2002. Malgré le railementement du flux migratoire par la crise économique des années 1980 et 1990, le nombre de maliens en Côte d’Ivoire au début des hostilités est évalué à près de 2 000 000. Une partie de ces migrants revenaient souvent au Mali pour y investir ou pour rendre visite à des parents restés au village. Suite à la conjoncture économique depuis les années 1980 et à l’exaspération des hostilités contre la communauté dioula, la communauté malienne en Côte d’Ivoire n’étant plus la bienvenue. Après l’éclatement du conflit ivoirien, les ressortissants malien ont été victimes de xénophobie, d’arrestations arbitraires, d’exécutions sommaires et de spoliation de leurs biens à Abidjan, Daloa, Bouaké et d’autres localités de la Côte d’Ivoire, provoquant ainsi le déplacement de milliers de rapatriés du conflit ivoirien, les ressortissants maliens ont été victimes de xénophobie, d’arrestations arbitraires, d’exécutions sommaires et de spoliation de leurs biens à Abidjan, Daloa, Bouaké et d’autres localités de la Côte d’Ivoire, provoquant ainsi le déplacement de milliers de rapatriés du conflit ivoirien.

Appropriation des instruments de gestion des ressources naturelles par les acteurs locaux de la commune de Madiama, cercle de Djenné

Bréhima Kassibo, Boureima Touré

Conçue comme un élargissement du pouvoir de l’Etat du centre vers le niveau local, la réforme sur la décentralisation est perçue comme un processus qui permet de faire participer les populations à l’élaboration et à la gestion des politiques qui concernent leurs territoires. Au niveau local, sa mise en œuvre fait appel aux acteurs en rapport direct et indirect donc le plus souvent des intérêts divergents. Ce faisant, son appropriation constitue un enjeu fondamental pour ces derniers, notamment pour la société civile », si cette dernière doit jouer un rôle de contre-pouvoir face aux autorités communales afin d’établir un équilibre entre les acteurs de l’ « âme locale ». C’est cette dynamique analysée dans la présente étude qui se réfère au cas de la commune de Madiama, cercle de Djenné. Ainsi, à travers l’intervention des bailleurs de fonds et des ONG, il s’agit d’évaluer le niveau d’appropriation des instruments de gestion environnementale par les acteurs locaux et de l’impact de leur intervention sur les plans social, politique et économique. Ceci amène à analyser les relations entre les institutions communales et la sphère de la gestion environnementale à travers l’implantation des projets de gestion des ressources naturelles. Ainsi, il s’agira d’évaluer l’efficacité des instruments de gestion des ressources naturelles transférés aux acteurs locaux dans la phase actuelle de post-projet, et de voir ainsi comment la création et le renforcement d’organes parallèles de gestion, tels que le Comité communal de gestion des ressources naturelles, peuvent avoir un impact sur la gouvernance démocratique locale.
Africa Review of Books / Revue africaine des Livres

Un dialogue politique pour l’Afrique

Sidi Mohammed Mohammed

Afrique : Réaffirmation de notre engagement
par A. Oluokhi, J. B. Ouldraogo et E. Sall (dirs.)
Série de dialogue politique, n°1, CODESRIA, 2010, 89 pages
ISBN : 978-2-68978-250-1

L'Afrique, c'est connu. C'est la pauvreté, les guerres, les génocides, les réfugiés, le sida, la dictature, les coups d'état et la liste est longue de fléaux qui marquent encore l'histoire contemporaine du continent. Et les facteurs responsables ? Une autre liste peut être établie : l’esclavage, le colonialisme, l'impérialisme, la corruption, etc.

Mais l’Afrique n’est pas seulement la terre du mal-être, elle est aussi une terre d’espoir en une vie meilleure pour toutes ses générations, des séniors témoins d’une tradition lointaine de solidarité et de responsabilité aux enfants comme projet d‘avenir du continent sur la scène internationale.

C'est dans cet esprit que le CODESRIA a lancé une série de dialogues politiques auprès de plusieurs personnalités africaines (chercheurs, hommes politiques, penseurs de la société civile et autres) suivant la célèbre formule d’un leader africain : « penser avec nos propres têtes, en fonction de nos propres réalités ».

Cet ouvrage rassemble quelques contributions à ce dialogue de chercheurs africains qui traitent de trois grands axes : la citoyenneté, la gouvernance et l’avenir de l’Afrique dans la communauté mondiale.

La citoyenneté

Le sociologue algérien Ali El Kenz met l’accent d’abord sur l’importance de la participation de l’intellectuel africain au débat sur les finalités de l’action politique et, ce non simplement en qualité d’expert apportant son savoir et son savoir-faire technique, fut-il important, et qui ne remplaçera jamais la réflexion sur les valeurs de la citoyenneté.

C’est dans cette direction qu’Ali El Kenz esquisse une réflexion sur le pouvoir politique et l’autorité en menant une comparaison entre la situation de l’Union Européenne et celle de l’Algérie, les deux ayant connu une crise de confiance entre gouvernants et gouvernés. Alors que les Européens essayaient de trouver une issue par le dialogue, les Algériens, eux, ont sombré dans la violence, et c’est ce modèle algérien qui semble, selon El Kenz, en cours dans les sociétés africaines.


La gouvernance

La deuxième partie de l’ouvrage traite de la responsabilité des élites et des citoyens ordinaires. Partant du constat que le monde contemporain se caractérise par la globalisation et l’hégémonie de la pensée néolibérale, Aminata Diaw de l’Université Cheikh Anta Diop pose la question de la responsabilité des élites intellectuelles et politiques africaines par rapport à « l’engagement et la prise en charge de la construction de l’Afrique » (p. 28).


En se basant sur cette rétrospective historique et sur l’hypothèse d’une rupture entre nationalisme et panafricanisme, A. Diaw s’interroge dans un deuxième moment sur la responsabilité des élites africaines dans une posture prospective. Elle avance qu’une telle responsabilité ne peut être appréhendée qu’à partir d’une rupture d’avec l’illusion messianique : c’est cette illusion forgée et entretenue par les élites intellectuelles et politiques et leur euphorie développementaliste qui a effacé le « citoyen », acteur cardinal de tout projet démocratique et panafrican.

Enfin, dans la dernière partie de sa contribution, A. Diaw appelle à l’innovation et à l’initiation politique. Elle appelle les politiques surtout à redonner espoir aux populations africaines, non dans une logique des hommes providentiels, mais des hommes rationnels ayant le sens de la mesurer, de discussion et de mobilisation des efforts pour le bien-être de tous les citoyens. C’est ici une responsabilité non seulement politique mais aussi éthique.

Adekunle Amuwo de l’African Association of Political Science traite, lui, de la responsabilité des citoyens ordinaires, mais il peint d’abord un tableau global où se situent ces citoyens. Ces derniers, affirme A. Amuwo, sont plus des sujets que des citoyens, de leur jeunesse aux yeux de leurs régimes africains et la relation entre gouvernants et gouvernés est désormais loin des cadres institutionnels et éthiques de la gouvernance.

Il y avait certes une certaine relation entre peuple et leaders dans les années 1960, mais elle a été brisée après l’arrivée des partis uniques et des militaires au pouvoir. Et, par analogie à l’Occident ou le Nord, la démocratie ultérieure est vidée de son sens politique et est devenue une simple stratégie d’hégémonie et de domination.

D’après A. Amuwo, les programmes d’ajustement structurel ont dramatisé davantage la situation dans la mesure où là où ils sont appliqués, les responsabilités sociales de l’État paraissent parmi les premières à être affectées, d’où l’approfondissement du fossé séparant les citoyens des gouvernants.

Quels sont donc les facteurs qui favorisent une participation active des citoyens dans la pratique gouvernementale ? A. Amuwo en donne trois :

- La conscience de leur place dans le jeu politique, aussi bien à l’intérieur qu’à l’extérieur de l’État-nation ;
- La connaissance de la balance des forces entre eux, les leaders et les forces sociales en présence ;
- La recherche de la somme-zéro dans leur relation avec les gouvernants selon l’une ou l’autre des conditions définies par l’attitude de confiance ou de non-confiance.

Finalement, A. Amuwo présente quelques considérations pouvant minimiser ou maximiser ces facteurs et qui s’orientent dans leur ensemble dans le sens de préserver les droits humains fondamentaux des citoyens et les droits politiques en premier lieu, l’objectif à atteindre étant la participation active des citoyens dans la prise de décision concernant les intérêts communs de la collectivité. C’est ainsi que se renouvelle le contrat social entre gouvernants et gouvernés et que se transforment les structures institutionnelles en droits sociaux, conclut A. Amuwo.

L’avenir de l’Afrique dans la communauté mondiale

Partant de la fameuse thèse de Marx sur l’interprétation et la transformation du monde, Souleymane Bachir Diagne de l’Université Cheikh Anta Diop appelle à une société ouverte en Afrique ? — une société où le rôle de l’Afrique aura été d’un autre thème, et non de celui de la politique des élites. C’est ainsi que se renouvelle le contrat social entre gouvernants et gouvernés et que se transforment les structures institutionnelles en droits sociaux, conclut A. Amuwo.

Le génocide au Rwanda ? Il faut cesser de penser la question, avance S. B. Diagne, en termes d’adversité extérieure, ancienne et nouvelle, mais l’atteindre d’une manière qui engendre des enjeux intérieurs qui n’ont pas exclusivement des mobiles religieux.

C’est ici qu’apparaît l’importance au premier plan d’une éducation à la citoyenneté, ouverte à la diversité culturelle et assurant la sécurité humaine. Cette éducation peut même aboutir à la redéfinition de la relation entre citoyenneté et éthique comme l’a tenté S. B. Diagne : alors que la pensée libérale veut que la citoyenneté soit basée sur la catégorie abstraite de l’individu et partant elle est disjointe de l’éthique, une autre vision, plus « réaliste » selon Diagne, consiste sur le caractère utopique de la neutralité éthico culturelle de l’État et donc il faut penser à redéfinir le concept de citoyenneté en termes communautaires et non individualistes.

Enfin, l’auteur appelle à une « culture politique du temps », à une attitude prospective ouverte sur l’avenir et dans la perspective de future génération qui s’orientent dans leur ensemble dans le sens de préserver les droits humains fondamentaux des citoyens et les droits politiques en premier lieu, l’objectif à atteindre étant la participation active des citoyens dans la prise de décision concernant les intérêts communs de la collectivité. C’est ainsi que se renouvelle le contrat social entre gouvernants et gouvernés et que se transforment les structures institutionnelles en droits sociaux, conclut A. Amuwo.

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Cet ouvrage se veut sans prétention scientifique comme tient à le préciser Jean-Jacques Deluz, s’adresse aux architectes, enseignants et autres politiques indépendamment de la nature des discussions dans les processus de fabrication de la ville. Après un coup d’œil autobiographique, auquel s’est réuni cet homme solitaire et secret qui a fini par adopter le je, il aborde l’objet du livre qui est structuré en quatre parties thématiques : la ville, le logement urbain, Alger-Algérie, l’enseignement et la création. Plusieurs sujets y sont abordés autour des problématiques urbaines et architecturales sous forme de réflexions, notes et propos mêlant les commentaires théoriques aux récits dont certains ont valeur de témoignage. C’est donc avec un véritable intérêt et autant de plaisir que se lit cette compilation composée de recueils qui constituent le résultat d’une vie de lutte(s) : « Le travail que je propose ici s’adresse aux politiques indépendamment de la nature des discussions dans les processus de fabrication de la ville. À la différence de ce que j’ai tenu à préciser, l’estime transposable au Maghreb et à l’Afrique. Tout en décrivant l’inextricable complexité d’un tel domaine, je m’efforce de le faire en reliant le bilan négatif qu’il nous semble être un des points de départ de la question urbaine, à la fois complexe et délicat. »
d’habitations sous forme de grands ensembles standardisés ont été réalisés avec 20 ans de retard.  
La ville nouvelle de Sidi Abdellah. 
Pour mieux comprendre la vision de Jean-Jacques Deluz et les leçons à en tirer (même si là n’était pas son intention), il nous livre le déroulement d’un processus épistémologique, au demeurant unique, de concevoir et projeter une ville nouvelle: Sidi Abdellah, non loin d’Alger, sur laquelle il travaille depuis 1997. Le concept nécessaire des éclaircissements, des débats, des hypothèses théoriques, une fois élucidées, ne relèvent pas les obstacles à franchir quand on est dans la réalité des lacunes de procédure et des conflits d’intérêt.  
Le concept de Jean-Jacques Deluz, c’était la cas des “plans d’épargne”, ce qui n’a entraîné qu’une mise en cause de la démarche, définissant essentiellement la nature des espaces et les avantages de la démarche. 
Entre autres conditions de mise en œuvre, les problèmes à résoudre relatifs à ce plan de masse, la parcellisation et l’implantation du site, celui du support juridique pèse défavorablement sur la démarche et la cohérence du projet: cette «condition manquait et reste un problème». Aussi la confusion n’a pas manqué de nuire à la maîtrise du projet, notamment à la question de la part réservée à cette partie de la ville. 
La ville nouvelle de Sidi Abdellah, qui se consacre d’abord à la recherche quand on est à Alger, Jean-Jacques Deluz nous livre ses pensées dans le chapitre intitulé Proposition pour une recherche en architecture en concluant sur Faire le dessin, le maillot... Hypothèses...Direction d’études. Par ce texte, il nous invite simplement à constater la production blâmable du logement et à identifier les séries de problèmes inhérents à une vision anti-urbaine de la ville. Mais au centre de la réflexion, il s’agit de retenir et de partager sa...conviction que des solutions existent dans la simplicité et le didactisme, contre le simplisme imposté par la technocratie. Il faut croire et préciser que toutefois, il n’est pas impossible de raisonner de manière critique, d’un paysage la part réservée à cette partie de la ville. 
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Vêtements, identités et visibilité des femmes musulmanes dans l’espace public

Khedidia Mokeddem
Hijab : nouveaux voiles et espaces publics par Mohamed Kerrou

L’intérêt de Mohamed Kerrou pour le hijab est récent. C’est la médiatisation et la politisation de ce phénomène, non en Tunisie, son pays, mais en Europe et notamment en France, qui l’a amené à réfléchir sur la question. Il convient de souligner que l’objet d’étude de M. Kerrou est le hijab et non le niqâb (le voile intégral). Ce qui interresse M. Kerrou, ce n’est pas le hijab classique mais les nouvelles manifestations vestimentaires du hijab qu’il appelle clairement « nouveaux voiles » et les enjeux politiques et de société qu’elles impliquent. Dans ce livre, l’auteur y analyse cette pratique dans l’espace public en Europe mais également dans les pays musulmans.

L’auteur relie l’avènement de ce nouveau phénomène à une montée du pouvoir féminin dans les sphères publiques. Le voile exprime des choses significatives sur les individus et sur la société et se veut porteur d’un discours révélateur d’un rapport organique entre identité et altérité. La symbolique identitaire de cette pratique favorise ainsi la visibilité des femmes dans l’espace public et remet en cause l’ancien ordre social et moral. Au sein de cette logique identitaire qui se déploie dans le cadre de la mondialisation, le revêtement est un phénomène social doté, de la part des femmes d’une stratégie politique de conquête de l’espace public.

L’espace public dans le monde est devenu le théâtre d’un mélange vestimentaire où s’enchevêtrent des corps vêtus d’habits inspirés de diverses traditions culturelles et d’effets de mode à travers lesquels s’expriment le souci de la différence et l’obsession de la ressemblance.

Comment lire ce signe vestimentaire qui, malgré de nombreuses contributions de valeur, demeure largement « impensé » par le savant et non maîtrisé par le politique ? Comment interpréter ce symbole dont la fonction sociale est moins de cacher ou de taire que de montrer et de dire, voire de manifester et de protéger ? Ces questions fondamentales sont posées par l’auteur.

En vue d’étayer cette thèse, plusieurs niveaux d’analyse constitués par le vestimentaire, le corporel, l’esthétique, l’éthique, le politique et l’économique mondialisés seront, tour à tour, abordés avec la perspective d’un croisement progressif afin de saisir les significations du « voile islamique » en rapport avec la question des identités des sphères publiques. En effet, la trilogie – voile, identité et sphère publique rend compte de la configuration et des variations d’un phénomène social complexe qui tient à la fois de l’esthétique, du ludique, de la stratégie matrimoniale et politique protestataire, de la distinction sexuelle et culturelle, de l’interconnexion entre le privé et le public et du conflit réel ou supposé entre l’Islam et l’Occident. Signe public par excellence, le voile est à penser en relation avec la théorie hermèsienne et post-hermèsienne des sphères publiques.

Ces voiles, à la mode dans les lieux urbains, symbolisent une revendication esthétique représentée par des individus et des générations partageant un ethos et une vision du monde où le politico-religieux n’est pas nécessairement de mise ; et lorsque c’est le cas, la religion se fait l’expression d’une polyphonie sociale enrobée d’identité culturelle. C’est en ce sens que les « nouveaux voiles » ne sont pas que des signes religieux ou politiques, ils sont révélateurs de changements sociaux empruntant le langage de la religion et de la culture pour mieux exprimer l’être collectif. La religion n’est qu’une dimension du revêtement en tant que phénomène individuel et social une multiplicité de significations qui relève du vécu et de l’imaginaire.

La raison d’être du voile n’est plus la sauvegarde de l’honneur masculin mais plutôt la garantie morale de la participation féminine à la vie publique, en tant que « voilées et modernes ».

Le hijab constitue pour les femmes la solution à leur « dilemme » dans la mesure où il autorise la liberté de leur déplacements et l’exercice de leur métier tout en signifiant publiquement leur adhésion à l’ordre traditionnel. En somme, le voile assure une sorte de mise en scène du corps et du pouvoir féminin toléré au sein de l’espace public musulman dont l’accès est permis aux dévoilées mais seulement dans des limites y compris des couches populaires et des milieux ruraux, d’accéder à l’espace public et d’acquérir une visibilité sociale et politique, tout en étant mises par une logique identitaire oscillant entre l’individualisme et le communautarisme.

Conclusion

Le voile en tant que comportement vestimentaire est au cœur du débat entre le politique et le religieux, il est à l’interface entre le moral et le sexuel. C’est un choix vestimentaire individuel et autonome qui inscrit la voilée dans une sphère collective où se manifeste l’opinion publique. C’est un symbole identitaire, une stratégie de paraitre dans les surfaces publiques.

Dans cet ouvrage, M. Kerrou ne se place pas en censeur moral sur la question du voile. Il n’émet pas non plus des jugements de valeur. Il fait juste un constat de cette pratique vestimentaire. Son objectif est de montrer comment les voilées s’extériorisent dans la sphère publique et d’analyser les enjeux de ce mouvement-dévoilement.

Note

1 Pour Jürgen Habermas, la sphère publique, notion empruntée à Emmanuel Kant et popularisée à partir des années 1960 dans le champ des sciences sociales et des débats médiatiques, désigne l’ensemble des personnes privées rassemblées pour discuter des questions d’intérêt commun et revendiquant la capacité de négocier avec le pouvoir des règles de l’échange économique, social et politique. Cette idée de débat public ou de publicisation des idées émerge, pour la première fois de l’histoire, dans les pays de l’Europe occidentale (Angleterre, France et Allemagne) par la constitution de sphères publiques bourgeoises qui interviennent comme contrepois aux pouvoirs absoluistes. Liée à l’État-nation européen qui se construit à l’époque moderne, entre le XVII et XIX siècle, la sphère publique nationale se situe entre l’État et la société civile dans un rapport de complémentarité et de concurrence.
Pour une anthropologie de l’enfance africaine

Fatima-Zohra Sebba-Delladj

L’enfant africain et ses univers
par Ferdinand Ezémébé

L’auteur distingue le concept de famille de celui de parenté : « Il s’agit d’une parenté qui n’est pas biologique, mais sociale. En effet, on est parent parce qu’on partage le même espace social : c’est une parenté de fréquentation. » Mais les modèles de famille patriarcale et matricielle restent les plus répandus malgré une crise de l’autorité parentale selon l’auteur s’étend à l’ensemble des sociétés africaines, sans atténuer ou atténuer les « techniques de maternage » comme l’allaitement, le massage ou le portage qui restent des pratiques essentielles dans la vie de l’enfant africain.

Par ailleurs, la symbolique du nom continue à jouer un rôle fondamental « l’enfant qui va naître et porter un nom a déjà un long passé derrière lui » (p127). Mais la transmission du nom est variable. Dans les sociétés patriarcales, c’est le père qui attribue le nom à l’enfant, comme c’est le cas des Bambara du Mali, des Peuls, des Soninkés... Par contre, dans l’ethnie Dogara du Burkina Faso l’enfant porte le nom de la mère. Au Congo, en fonction des ethnies, certains noms sont spécifiques aux femmes, d’autres aux hommes et d’autres sont mixtes, mais dans tous les cas ils restent codifiés. C’est pour cela que certains noms sont réservés aux griots qui sans être rattachés à une étroite précision sont des détenteurs de l’histoire du groupe, encore et encore ce seront des noms qui sont conservés et dont l’éducation des enfants, commenceraient à se remodéliser et à être chargés de nouvelles significations. Ce qui est variable sans indiquer de nouveaux comportements et donc nécessairement de nouvelles convictions aussi bien chez les adultes que chez les enfants. C’est ce qui ressort de la lecture du chapitre deux consacré à la psychologie africaine et aux concepts revisités mais aussi au statut de la parole et du langage ainsi qu’au rapport au corps et au temps, avant d’aborder l’univers religieux avec le rapport à Dieu et aux mythes.

On comprend, par exemple, comment l’image du sorcier a façonné l’imaginaire de l’enfant africain aussi bien à travers les contes que dans le vécu. De même que la coexistence de diverses croyances et pratiques religieuses (Islam, Christianisme, Animisme) a contribué à un « enrichissement » de son univers. Les pratiques culinaires et l’alimentation en général ou la nourriture participent d’ailleurs elles-mêmes à des rituels remplissant des fonctions de socialisation.

Dans la première partie, consacrée à l’enfant africain en Afrique, l’auteur traite en dix chapitres de l’histoire ancestrale et de ses bouleversements, qu’ils soient liés à l’époque esclavagiste ou à l’époque coloniale plus récente. Les diverses formes de structuration de l’ordre lignager et du droit coutumier ont le vide de l’enfant africain.

En effet, loin de s’arrêter aux cadres familiaux, en Afrique aussi en France, comme le laissent penser les titres des deux parties du livre, les dix sept chapitres qui les composent traitent aussi bien de la colonisation que de l’esclavage, en passant par la religion, la sexualité, la maladie, l’alimentation, la maltraitance ou la mort...

Les pratiques culinaires et l’alimentation en général ou la nourriture participent d’ailleurs elles-mêmes à des rituels remplissant des fonctions de socialisation.

Dans la seconde partie de l’ouvrage, consacrée aux processus d’intégration de l’enfant africain en France, Ferdinand Ezémébé présente d’abord une typologie des migrants africains. Au sein d’une population hétérogène, les adolescents africains sont souvent tirailés entre plusieurs modèles culturels, notamment l’enfant africain dans le milieu scolaire et la complexité des médias intellectuelles. L’auteur cite plusieurs exemples de compte-rendu de différents groupes de paroles sur divers sujets (sexualité, scolarité, adolescence). 

Le chapitre treize est consacré à l’adolescent africain en France où la quête d’identité commence par une quête de définitions et se prolonge jusqu’à la perception sociale et les préjugés psychologiques causés par le racisme enduré par les enfants africains. A cette tente que l’auteur consacre une partie à la « Psychopathologie de l’adolescent immigré : Paradoxe de l’identité raciale » avec une présentation de cas cliniques.

Cette psychopathologie est-elle introductive à la question des violences intrafamiliales de la maltraitance dans l’immigration qui prolongerait par l’esquisse d’une psychopathologie des migrants africains en France, et serait à la base de l’intégration rêvée en France ?

L’ouvrage se termine avec ce projet « d’intégration rêvée » avant d’amener l’auteur à conclure avec Aminata Traoré : « Nos repères et nos valeurs culturelles sont nombreux qui auraient pu ou qui devraient nous aider à reformuler notre quête d’alternative, en des termes clairs pour la grande majorité de la population et conformes à ses aspirations. Mais ils ne font pas l’objet d’une connaissance saine, capable de nourrir la réflexion et la créativité, de manière à transformer nos sociétés dans le sens que nous souhaitons » (p. 345).

L’enfant africain et ses univers s’impose comme un ouvrage de référence qui a permis à Ferdinand Ezémébé de conjuguer son expérience personnelle et sa maitrise conceptuelle. Il a réussi surtout à confirmer l’enracinement des univers de l’enfance dans une africanité vivante et prometteuse.

Notes
1 Jean-Godefroy Bidima, 1997, La palabre, une juridiction de la parole, Paris, Michalon.
4 Camara Baye, 1953, L’enfant noir, Paris, Plon.

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Guerre de libération et nostalgie coloniale : lorsque la ‘nostalgie’ fait office d’histoire

Mohammed Harbi et Gilbert Meynier

La guerre d’Algérie par Patrick Buisson
2009, 271 p + DVD

1962 change radicalement le cours de la guerre ; le FLN a gagné la partie, et richesse pétrolière française bradée pour épilogue, « les hommes bleus et l’or noir » – nostalgie exotique du Sahara

La guerre d’Algérie

O

Ces mémoires d’un étudiant africain sont essentiellement destinés aux jeunes Africains qui veulent continuer le combat en faveur d’une indépendance et d’un développement vérifiables. Il ne s’agit pas d’épargner un chapelet de souvenirs d’anciens combattants, mais de transmettre par écrit aux jeunes Africains les expériences politiques, syndicales et sociales de l’ancienne génération. L’auteur, né durant les années consécutives à la Grande Crise de 1929, a pu noter son Certificat d’études primaires élémentaires (CEPE) en 1945. Comme tous les élèves de sa génération, il a connu les affres de la Seconde guerre mondiale et les pénuries qui en ont résulté. La période allant de 1945 à 1960 est une période exaltante de lutte en faveur de l’indépendance et de l’unifi de pays africain. La défense de l’armée française à Dien Bien Phu en Indochine a considérablement contribué à affaiblir le système colonial français. Elle sera suivie par le déclenchement de l’insurrection de 1954 en Algérie, l’indépendance du Maroc, de la Tunisie, du Ghana et l’accession de beaucoup d’autres pays africains subissant la domination française à la souveraineté internationale. L’année 1960 qualifiée d’année africaine va clore le chapitre de la lutte contre le colonialisme classique, et ouvrir une ère nouvelle caractérisée par le combat contre le néocolonialisme.

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