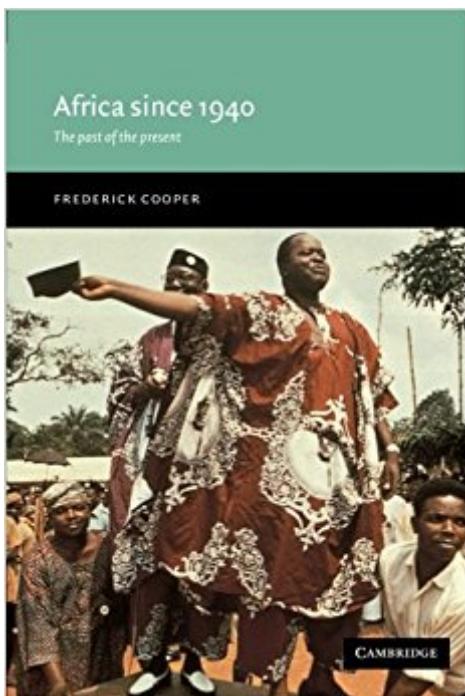


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Africa Since 1940: The Past Of The Present



Synopsis

Frederick Cooper's latest book on the history of decolonization and independence in Africa helps students understand the historical process from which Africa's current position in the world has emerged. Bridging the divide between colonial and post-colonial history, it shows what political independence did and did not signify and how men and women, peasants and workers, religious leaders and local leaders sought to refashion the way they lived, worked, and interacted with each other.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Historian Frederick Cooper combined his strong suit in comparative history and his interest in historicizing and interrogating bodies of knowledge to produce this welcome and welcoming study of the past of Africa's present as the inaugural volume of the New Approaches to African History Series....is as accessible as it is packed with solid, current information in useful formats." Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History "Recommended." Choice

Frederick Cooper's latest book on the history of African decolonization and independence initiates a new textbook series: New Approaches to African History. He deals with the historical process out of which Africa's current position in the world has emerged, bridging the divide between colonial and post-colonial history, and explains how political independence did and did not affect how men and women, peasants and workers, religious and local leaders sought to refashion the way they lived,

worked, and interacted with each other.

I have personally been challenged by the book. Having read and studies African history for many years this book launches out on new paths, new perspectives, new vistas giving the reader of history of Africa a very different view of the same facts that one has read and studies and taught before. This is not a book for easy reading, nor is a book for the casual reader of African history, but a book that challenges thought, ideas, conclusions and perspectives that have been held for a long time.

This book is a must have for any student of Imperialism in and its lasting impact upon the world, particularly the effects of decolonialization.

Fantastic Product!

This book is great for a number of reasons. The author is intelligent and is well versed in the subject matter; because of this the writing is very clear and concise. The book itself has a lot of useful and interesting information. This is a great book for a generalized crash course of Africa since the 1940's. My only gripe with the book is that it does not have page numbers. Without page numbers it's hard to keep track off where you are, as well as, cite the book in an essay or research paper. Books such as these absolutely need page numbers. I will most likely ignore books in the future unless there are page numbers.

To most westerners, even to many historians, the continent of Africa is a mystery. Most of us have heard recent stories about South Sudan and its years of guerrilla warfare, or about pirates working off the coast of Somalia. Years ago, we heard the news of genocide in Rwanda and of general elections in South Africa, the official end to apartheid. But many westerners would be hard pressed to name earlier significant events or personalities from the history of Africa. In order to help fill that gap, Cambridge University Press is now publishing a series of short books called, New Approaches to African History. The first volume to be published was Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present, by Frederick Cooper. The author is a recognized authority on the history of Africa. After completing the doctorate at Yale, Cooper taught at the University of Michigan from 1989-2001. Since then, he has taught at NYU. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. Cooper begins by saying that in this book he is writing for "general readers, students and teachers." He

observes that many works dealing with "politics, development, or other aspects of contemporary Africa" treat the period since independence "more as background than as a subject for consideration." By contrast, his intention is to meet the needs of readers "who would like to do more than that, who want to look at the past of the present in a more coherent way" (xi). He stipulates that his focus "is on the continent of Africa south of the Sahara Desert" (12), and claims that in certain ways the 1930s and 40s are just as significant to the recent history of this region as were the various moments of independence, most of which came twenty years or so later. He points to the two stories from 1994 mentioned earlier--genocide in Rwanda and popular elections in South Africa--and says that the colonialism and post-colonialism of twentieth-century African history were the essential precursors to both. Cooper makes this connection by explaining his main ideas. First, the recent history of sub-Saharan Africa may be divided into the following three parts: a time of development (1940-1973), followed by a era of downturn (1973-1990), followed by an ambiguous, open-ended period which began in 1990. The first period predates the various moments of national independence because, as the author explains, such radical change was precipitated by African aspirations that go back at least as far as the late 1930s. It was during this time that Africans began to recognize and pursue their political and economic potentials. The second period began not long after the decolonization of much of Africa. Spikes in world oil prices beginning in 1973, rising interest rates, and many African countries taking on more and more debt combined to bring about a demoralizing downturn from which many of those nations have never really recovered. For example, in Chapter 5, which features several impressive graphs and tables, Cooper points out that in the decade before 1976, the GNP per capita of Sub-Saharan Africa grew by 20 percent. In the decade following 1976, it fell by the exact same figure, 20 percent. As late as 1996, that measurement had barely passed the level recorded in 1966. Second, the legacy of colonialism combined with the legacy of African aspirations during the years before independence is the unique historical confluence that makes Africa what it is today. Cooper expresses this idea especially well in the following paragraph: No word captures the hopes and ambitions of Africa's leaders, its educated populations, and many of its farmers and workers in the post-war decades better than 'development.' Yet it is a protean word, subject to conflicting interpretations. Its simplest meaning conveys a down-to-earth aspiration: to have clean water, decent schools and health facilities; to produce larger harvests and more manufactured goods; to have access to consumer goods which people elsewhere consider a normal part of life. To colonial elites after the war, bringing European capital and knowledge to Africa reconciled continued rule with calls for universal progress. To nationalists, a development that would serve African interests required African rule. After

independence, new rulers could claim a place for themselves as intermediaries between external resources and national aspirations. But African rulers were in turn subject to criticism for sacrificing development for the people to personal greed (91). Modern African leaders had learned their political lessons from their colonial predecessors. But, says Cooper, in the absence of a political history that had worked its way from the ground up, and without the economic resources of a European metropole, all such leaders were virtually destined to fail. Third, the primary political dynamic at work in this history involves what Cooper calls the emergence of the "gatekeeper state." He explains that leaders of newly-independent nations in Africa sat astride "the interface between the territory and the rest of the world, collecting and distributing resources that derived from the gate itself" (157). The arrangement was practically impossible to handle; and it was mishandled in any number of different ways as Cooper demonstrates in the national case studies he reports in Chapter 7. What was the common denominator among these? The establishment of the gatekeeper state, says Cooper, "made the stakes of control at a single point too high. Politics was an either/or phenomenon at the national level; local government was almost everywhere given little autonomy" (159). In the final chapter, Cooper uses this insight in order to interpret, at least partially, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In short, the critical problem was the Rwandan government's "inability to manage the politics of a gatekeeper state in the face of diminishing resources" (191). By contrast, South Africa was a uniquely-different story in the continent's history. For one thing, the white Afrikaners there did not see themselves as colonists who really belonged somewhere else. Too, before the end of apartheid the South African government, though brutal, had managed to lead the nation to the highest level of prosperity in Africa. Thus, Cooper explains, the Afrikaners' strong sense of belonging and their tight grip that held until 1994 ironically created for their successors a situation far superior to the ones inherited in other independent nations. My overview here clearly reveals what Cooper believes are the most comprehensive horizons of recent African history: economics and politics. These are the topics that dominate his discussion. One might compare, for example, the number of references in this book to cultural or religious aspects of Africa since 1940.

"Suggested Reading" sections appear at the end of each chapter. The titles listed there might provide good comparisons to Cooper's approach.

I read this book for my Africa since 1940 class with Dr. Cooper himself. This book is incredibly clear, concise and well written. Dr. Cooper is exceptionally dedicated and writes the index himself as well as provides links to an online bibliography (so you can look at his sources for more information). He covers many of the important topics in modern African history. This textbook is a must read!

Book needed for University study and came in an excellent condition and much faster than originally quoted.

I do not know if Cooper is aware of Daron Acemoglu's work on Institutions and settler mortality. But if you take Acemoglu's work with in concert with Cooper's you have an excellent description of the problem with the African nation-state in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Acemoglu argues that those states that saw high settler mortality during colonization had poor institutions developed. Then, what's left is a state built purely on the extraction of raw materials. Cooper argues these states are "gatekeeper states," where the governments' number one goal is to control access to the raw materials and the outside world. Governments therefore build interest groups and political institutions to protect their own status. These coalitions can be as narrow as Mbosogo's regime in Equatorial Guinea or as broad as the beginning of the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. On page 192, Cooper sums this up as, "The common thread here is not just "ethnicity," for that is a label that glosses many different phenomena and processes, but a form of politics that makes an all-or-nothing struggle for inclusion or exclusion to access to state resources conceivable." The book is a quick read. Cooper does not inundate you with facts and figures from the past 65 years of African History. But he offers enough case studies of each incident to give a convincing argument for the gatekeeper state versus other theories of the African state such as neocolonialism. Indeed Cooper is probably a good jumping off point that helps put the scholarship of Acemoglu and Gerard Padro i Miguel in a framework. Anyone interested in the workings of African states and the failure of them to create modern nation-states, whether you agree with him or not, should read this book.

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