

THE MAKING OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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THE MAKING OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

The Development of African Society
since 1800

BILL FREUND





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List of Abbreviations

This list includes abbreviations used in the Notes to Chapters and the Select Bibliography (see pages 289–338). It does not include abbreviations used in the main text which are defined at the first mention.

- AA* — *African Affairs*
AB — *Africana Bulletin*
AEHR — *African Economic History Review*
AHS — *African Historical Studies*
BIFAN — *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamentale d'Afrique Noire*
CEA — *Cahiers d'études africaines*
CJAS — *Canadian Journal of African Studies*
CSSH — *Comparative Studies in Society and History*
EAPH — *East African Publishing House*
EHR — *Economic History Review*
HJ — *Historical Journal*
HWJ — *History Workshop Journal*
IJAHS — *International Journal of African Historical Studies*
IRSH — *International Review of Social History*
JAH — *Journal of African History*
JAS — *Journal of the African Society*
JBS — *Journal of British Studies*
JDS — *Journal of Development Studies*
JHSN — *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*
JICH — *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*
JMAS — *Journal of Modern African Studies*
JSAS — *Journal of South African Studies*
KHR — *Kenya Historical Review*

- MERIP* — *Middle East Research and Information Project*
RH — *Rhodesian History*
RLIJ — *Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Journal*
SS — *Science and Society*
THSG — *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*

Introduction

It takes some temerity to attempt a synthesis of the field one studies and teaches, particularly if one is a younger scholar. The first chapter of this book endeavours to explain the problems of African historiography as it has developed and I will not anticipate the points that I make there, except to say that my dissatisfaction with earlier syntheses in the light of the scholarship of the past decade or so and the irrelevance of much earlier writing to the current mood in Africa itself seem to justify the attempt.

This work is introductory. It assumes no previous knowledge of the history of Africa and is intended for the intelligent general reader. Unlike most textbooks, however, it avoids blandness and does not attempt to appeal to every point of view. It is an extended essay that considers, for various periods since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a few general themes: broad social and economic developments, the relationship of African social forces to outside interventions and the interplay of classes within Africa. Against these themes the main political events of African history are set.

In my view, the web of social and economic relations that emerges from human satisfaction of material needs forms the core of historical development. This book is therefore a *materialist* interpretation of history, in terms of how events are explained. This is generally to be preferred in usage to *Marxist* history which I feel has an unnecessarily sectarian ring, although it is largely to Marx and his followers that I turn for inspiration. Class struggle, with the classes defined ultimately in terms of their relationship to the labour process determines the form of history for Marx. He brilliantly

showed at varying levels of abstraction the one fundamental class contradiction that mattered to him politically, that between capital and labour in capitalist development. Classes are not unique to capitalism and forms of domination can precede or succeed true class societies. In the African continent there is a great range of historically specific social and economic relationships that, with some imagination and flexibility, can be discussed in class terms. One should not apply too mechanically the well-known terminology of domination and appropriation that comes out of the study of other parts of the world. Yet class certainly cannot be left out of African history.

For those interested in, but totally unfamiliar with Marx's historical categorisation, this book cannot hope to fill the gap. The reader is referred to works introductory (say Leo Huberman, *Man's Wordly Goods*) or systematic (say Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*). There are many of both. My own approach, moreover, involves a selection from a large range of interpretations of what Marx most emphasised in his work and of what a materialist history ought to be.

To the extent that the available format and information allows, this book tried to adopt the point of view of the ordinary cultivators and wage-earners of Africa. Yet at present it seems there is no single appropriate political line to be followed that can shape this perspective precisely. I therefore make my own political judgments, breaking with most previous radical (and indeed liberal) writing on Africa in trying to consider nationalism in modern Africa critically, rather than taking automatically a nationalist point of view.

Today considerable debate rages among intellectuals of the Left concerning the relative explanatory merits of internal class forces and external pressure and influence in the development (and underdevelopment) of contemporary Africa. The two are, in my view, so closely related that this is much like the question of the primacy of chicken or egg. However, I feel strongly that, until very recently, the pendulum has swung too far *politically* towards subsuming all Africa's problems as being the result of alien forces. The explosive power of capitalist penetration is often reduced to

an imperialist conspiracy theory. This is why I lay so much emphasis on social rather than national relationships, whose character was *never* entirely determined, even under colonial rule, by imperialism.

Much radical writing on Africa has tried to ignore or to sidestep Marx's emphasis on the dynamism and qualitative transformation induced by capitalism. At one extreme, it has even been claimed that Africa was conquered in order to forestall its economic development under indigenous auspices. I believe that it was conquered to open it up for capital in the one way that was historically possible. This resulted in the extraction of wealth which went overseas, but also in the genuine development of productive forces in Africa. From this perspective colonialism had both progressive and regressive features, as will be seen from a more detailed analysis; it cannot be understood in a purely linear way. Materialist history cannot possibly be reduced to anti-colonial polemic. The complex interrelationship between capitalism and colonialism in Africa is the central theme of the second half of this book.

Contemporary Africa suffers from extremely unequal power relations in the world and contains many features that can be *described* as 'economically dependent'. Unlike many radical writers I have become convinced, particularly during the last couple of years working on this book, that 'dependence' is a vague indeterminate quality that *explains* by itself rather little and belongs for most purposes to a nationalist, not a Marxist, point of view. There are many places in the pages to come where I deliberately criticise the 'dependency' perspective because it is so often confused with a class-conscious one and has acquired great currency among left-wing considerations of the 'Third World'. In 1974 the editors of the first issue of the *Review of African Political Economy*, which has played such a major role in the development of Left thought on Africa, wrote that:

We are . . . at odds with a position, claiming the mantle of Marxist orthodoxy, which holds that the distortion of so-called peripheral capitalism is no more than the natural and inevitable concomitant of all capitalist development, and that the potential of peripheral

capital is only as limited as the potential of capitalism itself.

Their position is now much less universally held and, on the whole, the perspective adopted here is not far from 'Marxist orthodoxy'.

A few rather more specific points about this book are also in order here. I have virtually excluded from these pages the history of Egypt and the Maghreb — Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco. These countries are as African as any other, but they are served by a large specialised historiography primarily in languages other than English, including Arabic which I do not read. It is on grounds of my ignorance and for the sake of convenience that I exclude them. As the first chapters stress, in reality the Sahara never formed an effective barrier to human, economic or cultural movements.

Other emphases reflect the state of my knowledge and the quality of available work. The detailed bibliographies, intended as guides to further reading, indicate my predilections, strengths and weaknesses while no doubt unintentionally omitting much excellent work. I have made an effort to consult and to consider material in languages other than English, particularly French, but my command of the literature is certainly far less extensive. The ex-British colonies have pride of place in this volume as one result. However, they do include Africa's largest (Sudan), most populous (Nigeria) and most productive (South Africa) countries. I use many examples from two countries where I have lived and done research, Nigeria and Tanzania. A third, South Africa, was my first field of research and seems to me so important, compelling and distinctive that I treat it separately and very generously, from the point of view of space, for the twentieth century. Those whose background is in other parts of the continent should learn more about it.

The spelling of African proper names presents a great problem to the scholar. There has been an increasing tendency towards the use of more phonetically correct usage which, however, only serves to confuse the general reader. The spellings chosen here represent a personal compromise between accuracy and custom which can never satisfy all.

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