

A Study in Afro-pessimism

Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*

Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2005

752 pp

ISBN 1 86842 220 8

R184.00

The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence is the latest offering from Martin Meredith, the author of many books on the recent history of Africa, as well as biographies of some of the major political actors. As the title suggests, this book focuses on Africa's experience in the half-century following the end of European colonialism.

Although it is subtitled *A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, its focus is, in fact, somewhat narrower than a comprehensive history of the continent, taking into account the diversity and richness of the African people and their culture, as well as the political and economic forces and trends that have helped shape the trajectory of the continent's development during the last fifty years. The author states quite clearly from the very beginning that the book "focuses in particular on the role of a number of African leaders whose characters and careers had a decisive impact on the fate of their countries" (p 13). The book concludes with a quote from a speech made by the British High Commissioner to Kenya in July 2004 decrying, in rather undiplomatic language, the persistence of

corruption in the new government of Mwayi Kibaki. The High Commissioner lambasted the country's leadership, stating:

We never expected corruption to be vanquished overnight. We all recognized that some would be carried over to the new era. We hoped it would not be rammed in our faces. But it has: evidently the practitioners now in government [in Kenya] have the arrogance, greed and perhaps a sense of panic to lead them to eat like gluttons ... But they can hardly expect us not to care when their gluttony causes them to vomit all over our shoes (pp 687-688).

Meredith's book is in the mould of the High Commissioner's speech in that it, to an equal degree, reflects the author's disgust with African leaders and decries the greed and corruption of Africa's ruling elite. It makes the point that what the High Commissioner was condemning in his speech was, unfortunately, a common occurrence throughout Africa because of the "predatory politics of ruling elites seeking personal gain" and that "decades of mismanagement and corruption" have left most African states unable to "provide aid and protection to their citizens". The book is, therefore, specifically a study of the African ruling elite and the governments they presided over during the past fifty years. It seeks to demonstrate that Africa's ruling elite has been lacking in good leadership qualities and that they have been largely responsible for Africa's woes.

It is not a pretty story that Meredith tells, as he parades one leader after another, from Kwame Nkrumah, through to Mobutu, Nyerere, Mengistu, Amin, Mugabe and Kibaki, among others, in a panoramic production that reveals these leaders' styles, policies, attitudes and decisions in all their ugliness. The reader is provided with a parade of incompetent, corrupt, vain, greedy, cynical and cruel individuals whose many foibles are explored and exposed for all to see. It is a study in Afro-pessimism which seeks to show conclusively why Africa "came to be spoken of only in pessimistic terms" (p 14).

The portraits of the leaders are drawn with a degree of intimate detail that can only be regarded as impressive. To cite one example among many, we learn that "Nkrumah was a lonely figure, distrustful of his close colleagues, rarely confiding in them. He enjoyed the company of women, but feared intimacy". We are informed about his close relationship with the British Governor's secretary, Erica Powell, who apparently was given permission by her boss to go to dinner with Nkrumah because Governor Arden Clarke felt sorry for a man he regarded as a "very lonely man. A *very lonely man*" [italics in the original – p 24].

The book comprises thirty-five chapters, divided into four parts, and preceded by an introduction. It covers most of the major countries on the African continent and traces the rise of particular leaders from the end of colonialism. The many unfortunate economic and political policy choices they made in the post-colonial era are examined.

The State of Africa is part of a growing body of literature about Africa which has come to be known generically as belonging to the Afro-pessimism school, one which sees the continent as a basket case for whom little hope exists. This type of literature tends to place all blame for the present African condition squarely on the shoulders of the African people. Unfortunately, in following this approach, scholars of this genre lose the opportunity to enrich their analyses by placing the present state of the continent within a historical and global perspective that attempts to identify factors, both locally and globally, in the past and present, which have shaped the trajectory of Africa's recent experience.

While sometimes a nod is made to the fact that Africans inherited unviable and largely mono-production based economies that were never meant to be more than appendages of the metropolitan economies of the colonizing powers, the poor performance of post-colonial economies is still, mostly, blamed on the Africans themselves. It is thus sometimes forgotten that, as Frederick Cooper cautioned in *Africa since 1940* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), pp 117-118, it makes little sense to talk about African economies as if they are truly African. He also added that it is important to remember that "African economic problems have long been co-productions" between Africa and the developed world. So much literature exists on this aspect of Africa's history and experience, that it is surprising that one continues to come across studies over and over again that focus only on African mismanagement, corruption and incompetence, without acknowledging the role and impact of the global political economy both in the present and the past.

Meredith is clearly not unaware of the impact of history and the contemporary world on Africa's experience during the last fifty years, for in his "Introduction", he highlights the fact that Africa's present states were the result of arbitrary lines drawn on a map by Europeans gathered in Europe and had no idea of the reality on the ground in Africa. For example, in the words of the first Nigerian Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a country such as Nigeria was nothing more than "a geographical expression" conjured up by the British colonizers which

bundled together people with different historical backgrounds, religious beliefs and customs (p 8).

Meredith also refers to the fact that colonial rulers did very little to develop meaningful economies in their possessions; to educate the African people (preferring to leave this task to missionaries); to expose people to the principles and practices of good governance in Western democratic systems which the colonizers claimed to represent; and to allow African participation in the structures of colonial governance in order to afford them hands-on political and administrative experience so that they would be well-equipped to inherit and run modern governments ably. Instead, many African leaders were imprisoned, restricted and detained for demanding the very democratic rights that colonial authorities held up as the ideals of civilized governance.

The author documents European interference in African affairs during the post-colonial period, such as in Francophone Africa; America's role in propping up Mobutu's regime in the Congo despite evidence of widespread corruption; the role of trans-national corporations in promoting public corruption as noted in the emergence of the "Mr Ten-Percent" phenomenon in West Africa; the problems of the deteriorating terms of trade (which Meredith notes but dismisses quickly as of no importance); and all the other policies and practices that have perpetuated inequality in the world trading system. All these factors should, surely, be factored into any explanation of the post-colonial history of Africa, yet the book treats these issues as unimportant and largely irrelevant.

The argument here is that, while the story that Meredith tells in *The State of Africa* is an important one that needs to be told, it is only a part of the whole story. Clearly, Africa has been unfortunate in most of its leadership, as Meredith's book makes patently clear. However, to focus only on poor African leadership, is to imply that Africa is unique in that respect and that, somehow, the continent has a penchant for producing a string of bad leaders. The history of Latin America since independence from Spain in the 1820s is one of political turmoil and economic problems, yet no serious historian of Latin America would blame the region's political and economic problems in the last century solely on poor political leadership.

The point is that the African leaders that are discussed in this book were not operating in a vacuum. Therefore, a more comprehensive analysis and appreciation of the complexity of the geo-political and

economic factors that influenced certain patterns of development or lack of it in Africa has to be undertaken if we are to have a balanced and insightful understanding of Africa's experience. Anything short of this runs the risk of pandering to existing stereotypical images of the Africans, some of which have been around since the era of European voyages of exploration and the periods of the African slave-trade and colonialism that followed.

Also to conclude, as Meredith does, that "African governments and vampire-like politicians who run them are regarded by the populations they rule as yet another burden they have to bear in the struggle for survival" (p 688), is not to do justice to the very real struggles faced by the African people in recent years to change the manner in which they are governed; to make their governments more accountable; to end one-party dictatorships; to demand an opening up of the democratic space in their countries; and to fight for good governance. The many leaders that have been forced to accept multi-party democracy by civil societies throughout Africa in recent years are evidence that perhaps the African people have not, as is suggested in the above quotation, resigned themselves to their fate and the "burden they have to bear".

As a historian, I hope I may be allowed one small complaint, namely that contrary to the tradition of professional historians, the book lacks citations in the form of either footnotes or endnotes. Often one comes across a very interesting assertion or quotation in the book that you would wish to follow up or verify, but, because of the lack of citations, you have absolutely no way of doing so.

Despite the above comments, *The State of Africa* is an engaging book that explores the contribution that African leadership has made to the continent's present problems and challenges. It will be interesting and useful to scholars of Africa's recent history, political scientists, students of African historiography, as well as anyone who has an interest in making sense of Africa's condition and the different interpretations that have been and continue to be advanced by writers.

A.S. Mlambo
Department of Historical and Heritage Studies
University of Pretoria