

# Rethinking the African Past

ELIZABETH SCHMIDT

The brevity of this slim volume, centered on three essays that were first presented as McMillan-Stewart Lectures at Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, belies the size of its contribution to our understanding of Africa's place in the world. Building on Du Bois's pioneering 1946 study, *The World and Africa*, Frederick Cooper integrates the African continent into the mainstream of world history by focusing on its experiences of capitalism, empire, and the nation-state. Pursuing his long-standing interest in "the relationship of possibility and constraint in the study of African history," Cooper, a highly regarded professor of history at New York University, connects his early work on capitalism and global economic relations with his more recent analyses of empire and colonialism. Each essay considers Africa in relation to the world rather than as a world apart, as well as the present implications of past choices and the multiplicity of alternatives for the way forward.

The first essay explores Africa's role in the world economy from the fifteenth century through the early twenty-first. Cooper argues that African economies have been shaped by the ability of large numbers of people to respond to or resist economic domination by internal or external forces—from the slave trades of the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries to the commercial and colonial capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, finally, to the neocolonial and "gatekeeper states" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (The term "gatekeeper state," coined by Cooper and developed in previous works, refers to postindependence states in which African political elites control local access to the global economy, benefiting from revenue and patronage possibilities in the process.) If some

**Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State**  
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Africans grew rich and powerful as intermediaries in the transatlantic slave trade, others responded to market opportunities in the twentieth century by growing lucrative cash crops such as cocoa and coffee. More recently, farmers in Niger, threatened by the encroaching desert, have rejected conservation policies imposed from outside—developing instead their own, more successful practices of intercropping trees and food crops.

Just as the path from past to present traverses roads not taken, the way forward offers more than one model for economic development and growth. Cooper warns that unless global economic power structures are challenged and alternatives are permitted to prevail, the extreme inequalities within African societies and between Africa and the West will persist.

The second essay focuses on Africans as empire builders, as well as the objects of European colonization. Historically, empires were a political form that Africa shared with the rest of the world; the racialized colonial empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were but one rendition. Tracing the continent's long history with empire, Cooper contrasts these episodes with the relatively short embrace of notions of popular sovereignty and self-determination and their embodiment in nation-states.

As in earlier works, Cooper argues against "a presumed narrative that leads inexorably from empire to nation-state, a pathway held to be both historically correct and normative." Instead, he examines alternative scenarios posed by African activists that would have led to political forms more in keeping with the continent's long history, including variants of federation derived from pre-colonial political institutions as well as European models. Some scenarios were inspired by the Asante and Fanti federations of precolonial Ghana, the Pan-African movement of the first half of the twentieth century, and the colonial federations of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa.

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Concerned about the poverty and powerlessness that would ensue from political and economic fragmentation, many African leaders disavowed independence on the basis of separate nation-states, calling instead for federations that would bind African territories together as independent entities or link them to metropolitan powers in reformed empires based on mutual consent. In the end, however, those advocating nation-states prevailed. With few exceptions, even leaders who had once advocated trans-territorial political formations and Pan-African unity were enticed by the personal benefits of state power.

### ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

The third essay further develops this theme, investigating why, in the aftermath of World War II, Africans opted for independent nation-states rather than other political forms that had been debated in the 1940s and 1950s. Resurrecting minority voices, Cooper suggests that their alternative visions might provide guidance for the future. The ultimate objectives of many postwar activist movements, Cooper argues, were social justice, economic development, and political democracy. The debate was over which political structures would be most conducive to realizing these aims.

Recognizing the dangers and limitations posed by independence, some activists envisioned the old empires, denuded of hierarchy, as the basis for new, more egalitarian political orders. They sought to establish trans-territorial African federations—or even confederations with the former imperial powers—that would allow for greater national identification and local autonomy while avoiding the impoverishment that would result from the balkanization of the continent into mini-states.

There were no guarantees that such a delicate balance could be achieved; and in the end, colonial territories attained independence as individual nation-states. The few trans-territorial federations established after independence—such as the Mali Federation, composed of Senegal and French Sudan—were weak and short-lived. No longer entitled to claim a share of the economic assets produced by larger entities such as French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, the impoverished nation-states had few resources other than sovereignty to distribute among their

citizens. As a result, postindependence struggles were often contests to control “the mechanisms of state power,” leading to dictatorship, corruption, clientage, and xenophobia.

Cooper concludes that the triumph of national sovereignty over all other rights was not foreordained, but rather was the outcome of political struggle that continues to this day, both in Africa and among Africans living on the European continent. From 1946 to 1960, African residents of the French West and Equatorial African federations moved freely about the empire and made political and economic claims on the metropolitan power, demanding voting rights, equitable wages and benefits, and other entitlements of citizenship. After independence, they lost their power to make those claims and were reduced to the status of foreign aid supplicants. Today, their descendants—deemed illegal immigrants in mainland France—risk deportation, despite the contributions of their citizen ancestors to French security and development.

Cooper wisely cautions his readers against doing “our history backward, assuming that the path to our present was the only option in the past.” Moreover, he posits that rethinking the past has critical implications for the future. False dichotomies that counterpose “Africa” and “the world economy,” “market” and “state,” “aid” and “local development,” and “sovereign state” and “foreign interference” are historical constructs that have changed over time. It follows that current patterns of international trade, finance, aid, and internal African economic and social policies can be rethought and set on a different footing.

Cooper’s short but pithy book helps us understand a great sweep of the African past in relation to the wider world. It also prepares us to rethink the present and to envision a new road to a more just, prosperous, and egalitarian future, with the inevitable wrong turns and pitfalls along the way. While Cooper might have explored in more detail African attempts to build trans-territorial federations that were not focused on the metropolitan power—some of which transcended the francophone-anglophone divide—this succinct summation of his pioneering work is an elegantly written, accessible synthesis that should find a readership among students, scholars, policy makers, nongovernmental organization staffers, and the larger public. ■

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