

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

JAY STRAKER. *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*. (African Systems of Thought.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2009. Pp. x, 264. Cloth \$65.00, paper \$24.95.

Jay Straker's book is part of a long overdue historical reconsideration of the first decade of African independence. With a few important exceptions, African history monographs tend to focus on the colonial era and end with the transfer of power. This has meant that social science studies dating from the 1960s and 1970s continue to dominate the scholarship on this vitally important period in African history. Framed by the modernization paradigm and focused on elites and political parties, these outdated works pay little attention to the common people who became citizens of the new nations. They therefore offer little insight into how Africans confronted the monumental challenge of turning colonies into nations. This historical lacuna means that there have been few credible explanations for the rise of the authoritarian "big men" of the 1970s and the "failed states" of the 1980s and 1990s.

Straker's book forcefully makes the case that scholars and journalists have misunderstood and misrepresented the postcolonial nation-building project as inherently negative and doomed to failure. Starting with the young people that were central to Ahmed Sékou Touré's attempt to fashion a new cultural and national identity for the former French colony of Guinea, Straker shows that the first generation to come of age in independent Africa had perspectives and aspirations that did not mesh neatly with either Touré's social revolutionary agenda or the free market counterrevolutionary regime that replaced it in the early 1980s. Even more refreshing, Straker corrects the tendency of outside observers to focus on the capital Conakry and Touré's Malinke political elite by siting his study in the remote and densely forested southeastern region of Guinea. These young *forestiers*, who are now deep into middle age, bore the weight of Touré's revolutionary agenda. Although they rejected the contradictory state policies that treated them as both authentic Guinean agents of revolutionary change and fetish-ridden rustic traditionalists, they nonetheless remained committed to the ideal of an independent nation free of French rule. In telling their story Straker demonstrates that there were actually many different kinds of nationalism in Sékou Touré's Guinea.

This book thus explains how the competition to imagine the postcolonial nation-state broke down along generational and regional lines. Consisting primarily of political speeches, state and popular newspapers, educational journals, novels, poems, plays, photographs, and personal histories, Straker's evidence is a departure from the colonial archival research and oral history mix that informs most African social history. This is due in part to his interdisciplinary training in cultural theory, but it also reflects the reality that the archives of independent African states will probably

never be as open to historians as those of their colonial predecessors. It is one thing to pick apart the inner workings of a defunct and unpopular foreign regime, but it is quite another to expect functioning and often authoritarian governments to grant researchers the same level of access to their official records. Thus Straker's cultural studies approach may well come to represent the norm of postcolonial African history.

Assessments of the effectiveness of these methodologies will most likely depend on the theoretical preferences and disciplinary biases of the reader. The first half of the book, which uses political tracts, educational journals, and various literary forms to highlight the contradictory and highly improvisational realities of Touré's revolutionary educational program, is not as strong as the second half, which uses oral histories to show the impact of these policies on young *forestiers*. Straker makes no claims of conducting a statistically significant number of interviews, but his informants do a fine job of conveying what it was like to grow up during a period when the nation itself came of age. This is particularly true for the young women who experienced both fame and sexual exploitation while participating in Touré's mandatory theatrical competitions. These are arresting stories, but Straker's insistence on treating them as "texts" on par with his other cultural evidence sometimes undercuts the overall force of his arguments. Furthermore, his reliance on non-Africanist subaltern studies and literary scholars to provide his theoretical framework is occasionally distracting. It would have been more interesting to draw on the perspectives of intellectuals from anglophone Africa, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who have similarly sought to throw off the legacy of colonial mentalities in imagining new African nations.

On the whole, however, Straker has written a vivid and powerfully optimistic work of compelling cultural history that is a welcome antidote to the pessimistic cynicism that pervades journalistic and scholarly accounts of African politics and nation building. The book ends before the death of President Lansana Conté plunged Guinea into another round of coups and state-sponsored brutality, but this makes Straker's reminder that authoritarianism does not stifle individualism or creativity all the more important and, ultimately, reassuring.

TIMOTHY PARSONS

*Washington University in St. Louis*

D. A. Low. *Fabrication of Empire: The British and the Uganda Kingdoms 1890–1902*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2009. Pp. xix, 361. \$108.00.

In Uganda's central kingdom of Buganda, local intellectuals throughout the colonial period emphasized that Buganda allied itself with Britain rather than being forced under British rule. D. A. Low's book describes this alliance and other accessions to the Protectorate of Uganda through meticulous attention to the individual agents who negotiated treaties, managed mercenary