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Review of Arnold G.: 'Africa: A Modern History'

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Citation

Ellis, S. (2007). Review of Arnold G.: 'Africa: A Modern History'. *Journal Of African History*, *48*, 317-318. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13042

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Journal of African History, **48** (2007), pp. 317–47. © 2007 Cambridge University Press
Printed in the United Kingdom

REVIEWS

THE HIGH POLITICS OF INDEPENDENT AFRICA

doi:10.1017/S0021853707002848

Africa: A Modern History. By GUY ARNOLD. London: Atlantic Books, 2005. Pp. xliii + 1,028. £35 (ISBN 1-84354-175-0).

KEY WORDS: Diplomatic relations, international relations, politics/political, postcolonial.

With 40 chapters and over 1,000 pages, and weighing in at about a kilo, this is a big book. For that reason alone, few people are likely to read this history of Africa since independence from beginning to end, and there are not many teachers who will place this on their reading lists ahead of the competition, most notably in the form of the recent histories of modern Africa by Frederick Cooper and Paul Nugent.

Thus, *Africa: A Modern History* is most likely to become a work of reference. It is well suited for such a role, being clearly written and organized and generally reliable in both its judgements and its references to specific events. It is divided into four chronological sections, each one treating a decade in the history of Africa from 1960 to the end of the millennium, followed by an epilogue that discusses some pointers towards the shape of the new century. Due attention is given to every part of the continent, including North Africa. Guy Arnold treats history as the high politics of the past: the annals of official diplomacy and decision-making, the deeds of presidents and prime ministers. There is little social history between these covers, including few mentions of HIV-AIDS or demography other than in some passing mentions. This is not the place to find an analysis of the deeper movements in African societies over the last 45 years, such as in the field of religion or in the emergence of new African communities in Europe and North America that remain important players in the lives of communities back home. *Africa: A Modern History* is fine for those who want an instant summary of, say, Milton Obote's Common Man's Charter (pp. 280–1) or the record of Ethiopia's Dergue (pp. 489–91), to take just two examples plucked more or less at random. Alongside the patient accounts of summit-meetings long forgotten, of coups and elections and the comings and goings of heads of state, a few key ideas run through the narrative. One thread that is noted by the author himself (p. 73) concerns foreign aid. Arnold, a veteran writer and journalist with a clear dislike of colonialism and an admiration for the principled internationalism of Julius Nyerere, has come to consider aid primarily as the technical means by which donor countries have maintained a neo-colonial relationship with Africa. He is scathing about the ruthlessness with which Western countries have asserted their own interests, turning the international financial institutions into their instruments of domination.

This book, then, purveys a view of Africa's recent history that is widely shared among liberal commentators, but it is also a version of the past that cannot easily accommodate some of the questions arising from recent scholarship and experience. Starting a history of modern Africa with the formal proclamations of national sovereignty diverts attention from the great continuities between the late colonial era and the first years of national independence that are increasingly evident as time goes by. The hindsight that permits us to see these continuities more clearly

than was possible at the time suggests that in many respects the proclamations of national sovereignty did not themselves mark a major historical rupture: these days, many historians would see the economic changes of the 1970s and the end of the Cold War as more likely candidates for the status of the main watershed in recent African history, with an earlier change of phase occurring around the time of the Second World War, as suggested by Fred Cooper's choice of 1940 as the starting-point for his history of modern Africa. Arnold is mistaken in asserting (p. 961) that aid was invented only at the time of independence – the major colonial powers instituted policies of colonial development in the 1940s and established funds for that purpose, shaping relations between the metropoles and the emerging African states before their independence had been proclaimed or even imagined by colonial policymakers. Although Arnold is often forthright in his criticisms of individual African leaders as well as of Western policies and attitudes, his view of colonialism and national independence as opposed forces does not leave much space for consideration of the tangled nature of African and non-African interests, a complexity that can be turned to advantage by skilled practitioners in Africa itself.

A work of this size will inevitably contain some factual errors. The most substantial ones detected by this reviewer were the very high figures (p. 59) and the inaccurate chronology (p. 316) attributed to the European slave trade. The useful potted histories of individual countries are generally better on the Anglophone ones than the French-speaking ones. Nevertheless, Arnold is generally to be congratulated on the patient accumulation of detail that gives this book its substance.

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A MAJOR WEST AFRICAN TOWN

doi:10.1017/S002185370700285X

West African Early Towns: Archaeology of Households in Urban Landscapes. By AUGUSTIN F. C. HOLL. (Anthropological Papers No. 95). Ann Arbor MI: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 2006. Pp. ix+168. $26, paperback (ISBN 0-915703-61-0).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, archaeology, precolonial, urban.

Awdaghost (the modern Tegdaoust) is the most extensively excavated medieval town of the Sahara, and, if we are to believe al-Bakri, was widely famed for its size and wealth. Located in south-central Mauritania, it was excavated between 1960 and 1976, with the principal results published in five successive monographs. Augustin Holl's interest in the site is of long standing, as he makes clear in his introduction, and fits within his earlier research in West Africa on the links between social dynamics and the spatial organization of settlements. The book's intention is straightforward: to take advantage of the detailed publication record for Awdaghost to analyse patterning in the use of domestic space across successive occupations of the site. As Holl points out, it is plausible that variation in how people organize their living space responds to demographic, social and economic influences. Its analysis should therefore open up windows on many facets of the past, including questions such as whether towns like Awdaghost