



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Fuglestad F.: 'The ambiguities of history'
Ellis, S.

Citation

Ellis, S. (2006). Review of Fuglestad F.: 'The ambiguities of history'. *African Affairs: The Journal Of The Royal African Society*, 105(418), 151-153. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12910>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12910>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Leys: 'they were the first observers to describe publicly the extent of African subsidy of white settlement'.) Some readers will be irked by the constant emphasis on sacrifice, taming nature, and pioneering.

Notable omissions include the Galbraith Cole trial and deportation in 1911; other scandals surrounding Governor Girouard; land speculation (which is how the big landowners *really* made money); and challenges to Delamere by smaller settlers. What really made him tick? We are none the wiser. There is surprisingly little on cattle baron Gilbert Colville (in some ways bigger and more successful than the Delameres), hunter and diarist Richard Meinertzhagen, Karen Blixen, the Kenya Land Commission (whose failures are still being felt today), and settler plans for self-rule, apart from a threatened rebellion in the 1920s. Nicholls deliberately chooses not to examine African responses to colonialism in any depth. Remarks on Mau Mau tend towards seeing it solely as evidence of unreasoning terror. Yet without a serious examination of African responses over time, one cannot explain why white rule was doomed to end when and how it did.

In conclusion, the author seems to concur with Huxley's assertion that settlers came 'bringing gifts', for which local people were not as grateful as they might have been. Africans apparently learned all they now know about agriculture, stock, and land management from the Red Strangers. They tried to 'guide the African peoples through the transition from tribalism to nationalism [*plus ça change*]...brought peace where once there was war', ended slavery, built towns and infrastructure out of bush, etc. She concedes that too few Africans were educated and brought into the civil service, that investment in African development came too late, and that the overall approach was well meaning but paternalistic. One major and positive legacy, a legal system, is hardly mentioned. As promised, few pages are devoted to the citizens of Happy Valley.

At the end of the day, however, maybe we need to remember Norman Leys's exhortation: 'It is necessary to state that the Europeans who live in Kenya are just ordinary people. Eager reformers at home may naturally assume that they are specially bad, or at least have more bad people among them than usual. They themselves think they deserve to have an influence in the colony and in the commonwealth out of all proportion to their number. Both views are false'.³ Tempting as it may be, we cannot (though many will) judge the past by the norms of our age. Throughout, Nicholls is at pains not to do so.

University of Oxford

LOTTE HUGHES
doi:10.1093/afraf/adi100

The Ambiguities of History: The problem of ethnocentrism in historical writing, by Finn Fuglestad. Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, 2005. £22.00. 152 pp. ISBN 827477204.

In 1963, the Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper (later, Lord Dacre of Glanton), gave a series of lectures at Sussex University that were transmitted by BBC television and, subsequently, published both in a popular periodical and in a book. Trevor-Roper argued that sub-Saharan Africa had no history. The past of that area he considered to be clouded in darkness, and 'darkness is not the subject of history'. To his way of thinking, 'history is

3. Norman Leys, *Kenya* (London, The Hogarth Press, 2nd edn, 1925), p. 153.

essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too.' Africa's record did not demonstrate this, he thought, but consisted of only 'the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe'.

Trevor-Roper's opinion, as described by Finn Fuglestad in the first chapter of this book, provoked shouts of protest, particularly from western Africanists, and especially the historians who were at that time pioneering the professional study of African history in universities, London's School of Oriental and African Studies being in the forefront. The gist of the Africanist response was that Trevor-Roper was wrong since Africa's past demonstrated purposive movement in abundance. Therefore, Africa did have a history.

Finn Fuglestad, a professor of history at Oslo University who began his career as an Africanist (he studied under John Fage, one of the main respondents to Hugh Trevor-Roper, and is the author of the standard work in English on the history of Niger) but who has also published widely in Norwegian on the history of other continents, has been thinking about this exchange for many years. He published a thoughtful journal article on the same subject in 1992. He has now worked up his ideas into a 151-page essay, and a rattling good read it is too. Although this is a work of historiography, it should be read by anyone curious about Africa's place in the world, a category that surely includes all readers of *African Affairs*. It is lucid and unpretentious in style.

Fuglestad argues that the Africanist historians' response to Trevor-Roper's arrogant dismissiveness was fatally flawed. Their mistake was to accept the Regius Professor's definition of history as 'purposive movement', a view of history rooted in an intellectual tradition that goes back to the Enlightenment. Not all human societies have had such a view of history, including, according to Fuglestad, not only Africa but also China and India. By trying to prove that Africa's past did indeed show evidence of purposive movement, historians of Africa were applying modern Western concepts to records of the past from other areas without making a serious attempt to think about what past generations of Africans may have thought about their own location in time. Africa was always going to fit awkwardly into a European-originated view of history. By trying to squeeze one into the other, Africanists were making the mistake of implicitly agreeing with the categorization of the world proposed by Trevor-Roper and others, namely that there are people with history and people without it. By arguing that Africans had history, they were implicitly agreeing that there were probably others who did not have it. (Quite who these latter are remained unspecified.) The site of discussion became not an investigation of what history is, seen from a world point of view, but a debate as to where the divide lies exactly between those who have history, and by implication civilization, and those who do not. In short, '“Westernised” African history was the easy way out' of the intellectual challenge posed by considering how to think about Africa's past, since 'it relieved Africanists of...necessary theorization' (p. 93).

It is hard to disagree with the proposition that historians of Africa have not adequately explored the theoretical aspects of their profession, and it is no doubt for that reason that African history has had far less impact on the historical profession than, say, Indian history or gender history, both of which have generated distinctive new insights of general relevance. Interestingly, Fuglestad considers that one of the main challenges to rethinking the post-Enlightenment view of history is posed by religion (pp. 98–9). If so, we will have food for thought for decades to come, as religion seems to be reasserting its claim to public space in most parts of the world. Africanists who care to think about this deeply will be performing a service for everyone.

There is quite a lot that this reviewer would like to discuss further after reading this short, provocative book. I would be particularly interested to pursue a point

made elsewhere by a leading historian of South Asia, Dipesh Chakrabarty, that the intellectual heritage of Europe is no longer a European possession: Karl Marx belongs to everybody. Good history-writing may indeed involve trying to rethink the thoughts of people long dead, but it also involves judgement of our own. In any event, we need more books like this one.

Afrika Studie Centrum, Leiden

STEPHEN ELLIS
doi:10.1093/afraf/adi101

An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa and Burundi, by Kristina A. Bentley and Roger Southall. Cape Town: HSRC Press, Nelson Mandela Foundation & Human Science Research Council, 2005. xix + 220 pp. £18.50 paperback. ISBN 0796920907 (paperback).

The Burundi peace process was a landmark in the sustained commitment of regional governments to finding peaceful solutions to the continent's problems and to tackle problems of inequalities and gross violation of human rights. It provides an example of an effective African mediation process — managed by mediators, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Nelson Mandela of South Africa, and supported by regional leaders. In so doing, it exemplifies the ability of Africans to tackle Africa's problems.

For these reasons alone, it is important that the process is documented and fully recorded so that lessons can be learned for the future. This book was commissioned by Nelson Mandela as a testimony to South Africa's involvement in the Burundi peace process. South African former foreign minister, Jacob Zuma, took over the cease-fire negotiations from Mandela, and the nation was the main contributor of troops to the international peacekeeping force. South African lives have been lost in pursuit of peace in Burundi.

The book is written with a South African audience in mind and involved consultation and interviews with some of the key actors in the peace process. The 15 brief chapters begin by considering the relevance of South Africa's role in the Burundi peace process; the authors conclude that 'democracy and development in South Africa are both inextricably linked to progress towards those goals throughout Africa as a whole' (p. 3). This is explored further by addressing the international context, the legal basis, and the UN and regional involvement in finding a solution to the Burundi conflict. The content of the book is as follows: chapters 3–5 contextualize the peace process through a consideration of the impact of war on Burundi society and the historical roots of the crisis; chapters 6–8 deal with the peace negotiations up to the signing of the Agreement on 28 August 2000; chapters 9, 11, and 12 discuss the aftermath and the installation and performance of the transitional government and the post-Arusha cease-fire negotiations; chapter 13 looks at Burundi's civil society and its linkages with South Africa, in particular the role of South African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting civil society groups in Burundi; chapter 14 outlines the similarities between South Africa and Burundi in terms of political and ethnic composition, the crimes committed against humanity, and the replication of a truth and reconciliation commission in Burundi. The book's concluding comments, in chapter 15, defend Mandela and tackle criticism of his approach and the weakness of the agreement, while the postscript reflects on the significance of the regional crisis for Burundi.

There is no doubt that Mandela (who took over as mediator in December 1999 after the death of Julius Nyerere) steered the parties to signing an agreement in just under nine months of his involvement. While he deserved praise for such a feat, the