AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW  DECEMBER 2010

and global economy and on Egyptian and Italian policies of centralization. Chapter three discusses some of the ramifications of Massawa’s economic “revolution” and concentrates on the commercial and urban worlds of its coastal society. The histories of Arab and Indian entrepreneurs who capitalized on the trade boom make particularly fascinating reading. Equally absorbing is the discussion of the social and spatial geography of Massawa and of its expanding conurbation on the coast. Chapter four elaborates on Islam and urban identity in order to illustrate what Miran calls “Massawa’s paradigmatic Islamic character” (p. 215). The author introduces the reader to the Sufi orders (and the families associated with them) that promoted an Islamic revival in the nineteenth century, particularly among the Tigre-speaking population of Eritrea’s lowland region. The politicization of these orders is analyzed with reference to Italian colonial policies, and some attention is also devoted to Muslim practices and institutions. In the last chapter Miran makes an argument for “being Massawan” by exploring the social world of notable families and their sources of authority. The emphasis is on Muslim identity and the Arabization of the town’s elites as a sign of social status prompted by the wealth and influence of merchants originally from Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. This is a rich, brilliantly researched, and intellectually ambitious book that will stimulate further research on the region. The study is written at three levels, combining different historiographical traditions. The first is that of the Red Sea as a regional world; this approach is grounded in the Braudelian notion of historical “conjunction” and is inspired by studies on the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean and by a new historiography of the “margins.” The second level of analysis is structured by the concept of “conurbation” developed through the study of the Swahili coast of East Africa. Following this line of inquiry, the author portrays Massawa and its satellite coastal settlements as an integrated micro-urban system connecting land and sea. The third approach is micro-historical with a focus on urban elites. Their lives, family histories, and cultural attitudes are reconstructed through Islamic court records and genealogies following a consolidated tradition in the study of the Ottoman, Arab, and Islamic worlds.

Given the scope and breadth of the study the picture that emerges is very complex and nuanced with inevitable limitations. Scattered evidence of maritime connections with the Indian Ocean and the few references to other African sea towns are likely to attract some criticism on the part of regional specialists. For urban historians, such as the writer of this review, the book represents an excellent addition to a growing body of literature on port settlements and coastal societies in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf. In some respects, however, the thematic organization of the book does not entirely succeed in presenting a composite picture of the evolution of Massawa as a city society and as an urban space. For instance, the separate treatment of commercial institutions and urban authority (in chapters three and five, respectively) obscures the links among trade, politics, and the accumulation of wealth and urban growth that were central to the power base and social identities of merchant notables in this age of commercial and colonial expansion.

The book is perhaps unnecessarily long and would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand to even out inconsistencies in style and to avoid repetition. All these are, however, only minor shortcomings when compared with its many achievements. In sum, the author must be praised for such a thorough and thought-provoking piece of research.

NELIDA FUCCARO
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA


Violence has long been a recurring theme in narratives about Africa. From Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902) to contemporary analyses of civil wars, there is, some might argue, a privileging of violence in discourses about the continent. Toyin Falola, however, manages to bring a novel and interesting dimension to a well-worn subject. He goes beyond fixation on the conflicted postcolonial African state to examine the colonial antecedents of this legacy of violence.

The book’s central argument is that colonial violence in Nigeria was based largely on intentions, political calculations, and expected consequences. British authorities claimed the legal basis of their power rested in the treaties of surrender signed by African kings and chiefs. Colonial rule, however, was sustained and established in part through violence. Nevertheless, the colonial state did not have a monopoly on violence—if British colonists saw violence as a means to achieve conquest and legitimize domination, Nigerian groups also saw it as one form of resistance. Both sides viewed the use of violence as legitimate. The colonial state had the power to criminalize and punish, and the legitimacy of its own violence could not be questioned. The activities of state agents could be investigated, but this did not threaten the basis of institutional power.

Falola argues that resistance violence cannot be interpreted solely in terms of its final outcome. For Africans, violent resistance was more than an instinctive response to domination, exploitation, and inequality. Violence was also a tool with which to negotiate power relations. Some chiefs and kings gained important concessions and even enhanced their power through violent resistance. Ultimately, violence or the anticipation of violence shaped the ways European officers behaved and forced them to negotiate with many of their subjects. Colonial officials pragmatically recognized the limitations of violence as a tool of control. However, the restrained use of coercion was not an act of magnanim-

This well-researched and thoughtful book differs from others in the field because it does not examine how the British colonial state fell short of its own liberal agenda in Africa; instead it explores how the language of rights became central to the colonial project in southern Nigeria under British colonial rule and focuses on the complexities surrounding the use of rights language by different groups. These earlier traditions of rights discourses are relevant to understanding current debates about human rights in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa.

Bonny Ibhawoh shows that there were different rights discourses at different phases of the British colonial project in Nigeria, and that rights talk was one of many discourses Africans adopted as a means of articulating and promoting their interests within colonial society. Early colonial missionaries, for example, worked to ensure that African converts were not encumbered by the restrictions and limitations of pagan laws and customs. Although there were “racial” limits, Africans responded by seeing Christianity as a means to escape the restrictions imposed by local customs and the colonial order.

Law was an important arena where Africans and Europeans engaged one another to contest relationships of power and authority, interpretations of morality and culture, and access to resources such as land and labor. By the 1890s the colonial legal agenda had moved beyond trade and politics to embrace social concerns. An English-style legal system, introduced in the newly established Southern Nigerian Protectorate, and various ordinances were effective ways of maintaining control through fines in cash, produce, and labor.

A growing class of elite, educated Africans along the coast supported a Native Administration in the interior provinces but strongly opposed colonial efforts to bring this system to Lagos, on the grounds that it would interfere with their rights as “British subjects.” Lagos barristers also protested their exclusion from the Native Court system. Southern Nigeria Protectorate African elites deployed the language of rights to oppose the colonial state at the turn of the twentieth century, but also used rights language to promote their own class interests when they conflicted with those of other groups of Africans.

Nigeria also developed a tradition of robust media debate. Early newspapers occasionally challenged colonial policies but mostly supported British colonialism, arguing that “The English are acknowledged to be the best colonizers, and the secret to their success lies in the great consideration invariably shown by them to the people, whom they undertake to govern, affording them at the onset the full liberties and privileges of British subjects” (p. 71). However, by 1900 a vigorous and articulate class of educated Africans controlled the local press. Newspapers advanced the nationalist cause and became the voice of opposition to the excesses of colonial rule.

Press freedom—seen as one of the most valuable privileges of British colonialism—posed a dilemma for colonial officials who were ambivalent over whether to censor the press or allow unrestricted criticism and deal with agitation. By the 1930s, press freedom was seen by many colonial officials as a way to reduce tensions through the nonviolent public expression of grievances.

Land tenure also engendered African challenges to the colonial state and reinforced the anticolonial movement. By 1910 the colonial state changed its attitude...