

BOOK REVIEW

Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, Moritz A. Mihatsch, and Michelle M. Sikes, eds. *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023. 230 pp. \$21.99. Paper. ISBN: 9783111353272.

The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa is a valuable addition to the expanding body of research on memory and its political implications within contemporary African contexts. Crafted as a tribute to historian Jan-Georg Deutsch, a mentor to all contributors, the book provides a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective on societies grappling with the burdensome legacies of both colonial and more recent historical events. With its six chapters primarily authored by historians, the work encompasses a diverse range of countries throughout Africa.

The volume adopts contestation as a unifying framework to examine the intricate politics around the interpretation and commemoration of the past. Most of the discussion in the chapters centers on the dichotomies that shape the politics of memory, such as public versus private, written versus oral, official versus unofficial, ruling party versus opposition group, and Pan-African versus national perspectives. By exploring tensions between these categories, the book illuminates how the struggle over the past constitutes a central aspect of contemporary political and social dynamics.

The volume is structured into three parts. The chapters in the first section focus on political contestation and intellectual complexities surrounding the construction of national and African histories. In Chapter One, Natacha Filippi offers a critical examination of prisons as memoryscapes. By delving into the embodied and oral memories of inmates, this chapter sheds light on how these narratives disrupt and challenge the officially sanctioned memorialization enshrined within former apartheid prisons, which have now been transformed into museums. Chapter Two by Casper Andersen undertakes a critical analysis of the ambitious 1964 UNESCO project titled “General History of Africa.” The chapter offers insights into the lively discussions and debates among historians, as well as the challenges encountered in the project of decolonizing African history, specifically the attempts at reconciling Pan-African ideology, UNESCO’s “one-worldism,” and the diverse national realities across the continent.

The chapters in the second part probe into the memory-politics that extends beyond the legacy of colonialism. In Chapter Three, Edward Goodman examines the contention around the memorialization of “Kenyatta Day,” promoted by the ruling party, and the “National Heroes’ Day” of the opposition and how it underpins distinctive political projects in postcolonial Kenya. In Chapter Four,

Mohamed Haji Ingiriis provides an analysis of postcolonial violence in Somalia by examining how the suffering and grievances of the civil war contributed to the legitimization and reinforcement of the northern separate state, Somaliland, a region historically divided along clan lines.

The third part returns to colonialism, exploring the concept of nostalgia as a social force that shapes communities and identities. Rouven Kunstmann and Cassandra Mark-Thiesen offer an insightful analysis of obituaries in colonial Nigeria and Liberia, unveiling how obituaries contributed to the forging of future political and economic aspirations among African urban elites. In the sixth chapter, Nina Studer examines the role of alcohol consumption in solidifying French occupation in Algeria and highlights how the nostalgia for French colonialism is often metaphorically associated with this habit.

The book concludes with an epilogue by poet-historian Ruramisai Charumbira calling for more consideration of African voices and historicities, emphasizing the importance of producing historical knowledge that resonates with African audiences.

One of the strengths of this book lies in the research robustness and insightful analysis of each contribution. Nevertheless, the distinctive perspectives of each chapter may somewhat obscure the overarching theoretical and methodological contribution of the book. Although the editors assert that the book enhances the understanding of the commemoration of the colonial past and the political dimensions of memory, it is not very clear how it advances these fields. One potential avenue for enhancing the book's contribution could have been the emphasis in the introduction on how the politics of memory not only encompasses *opposition*, which has been extensively analyzed in existing literature on memory in Africa, but also an ongoing process of *negotiation*. While each chapter effectively shows how the construction of the past engenders a multitude of social and political conflicts, they also foreshadow how the production of memory involves a nuanced interplay of diverse historical agents, media, and discourses. A clear example is offered by Kunstmann and Mark-Thiesen's chapter, where the analysis of obituaries serves as a compelling case of the convergence of Western modes of memorialization with African voices, and of public and private memories.

Additionally, a considerable portion of the book focuses on symbols and practices of public memorialization, which not only encapsulate the colonial past and its far-reaching consequences but also, in certain cases, are themselves cultural products of that historical era. While this focus proves to be valuable and aligns with the scope of the book, one wonders whether Charumbira's suggestion to incorporate indigenous historicities and sites of memory could have further enhanced the discussion, thereby strengthening the book's original contribution to the ongoing debates surrounding colonial memorialization.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the book stands out as a rich compilation of case studies that will certainly assist students and scholars conducting research within these contexts. Collectively, the chapters, along with the preceding and forward contributions, will inspire anthropologists, historians, and scholars in African studies to engage with questions around the production of

historical knowledge and imagine future trajectories of research on memory in Africa.

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