

*Recasting the past: History writing and political work in modern  
Africa*

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**Derek R Peterson & Giacomo Macola**

Ackson M Kanduza  
*University of Botswana*  
kandiuza@mopipi.ub.bw

I find edited works complex and difficult to review. In the work under review, the difficulties are reduced because the editors organize the book under a set of major themes. The themes are a helpful guide to the reader but I am still left with a feeling that, since the collection is such an impressive contribution to African intellectual and historical studies, each part should have been developed into a separate book. The various parts, under which the editors group the chapters, represent different parts of the continent. If there were more chapters, each part would have been more comprehensive and richer, covering a longer time frame.

The irony of scholarly works is that any apparent limitation is, and should be seen as, a justification for another project. The book is an important contribution to intellectual discourse on change and the making of new institutions and cultural practices. It renews an effort to spread or recast scholarship in ways that reveal that there is or there was more to African history than was demonstrated by hegemonic themes on state formation, political movements or labour migration. Besides its intellectual merit, the book makes a significant suggestion on how to train a new generation of historians in Africa. It challenges younger African historians to become critical and to recognise that the past had different voices.

This collection is significant in at least two ways. First, it is a belated recognition of the intellectual output of Africa's westernised elites. They were

intellectual giants and the guardians of their times because they constructed an African society before the impact of foreign influences. Taken together, the chapters cover a large area of the continent over a long period. What the editors call 'homespun' historians faced many challenges, which included the dissemination of their work. Peterson and Macola make an immense contribution to overcoming this challenge because modern communications now make dissemination easier. Second, the voices of the 'homespun' historians reveal the failure of European colonial powers to provide basic education and to promote the use of locally produced knowledge to train Africa's future professionals. Peterson and Macola recognize the enduring curse of government failure and turn it into a subject of study of early written African scholarship and history.

The editors tie diverse themes into neat bundles and link them to a superb introduction and an appropriate concluding chapter by one of the leading historians of Africa. The first theme is on creative writing, and introduces a sample of extraordinary talents from the first generation of African writers. These early western-educated elites and writers made critical and historical studies of their communities. It is correct, as Karin Barber states, that representations of the past in relation to contemporary contexts shed light on the era in which they were written. Petros Lamula writing about the Zulu and Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula writing on the Balla in Zambia assess their societies critically. Nkumbula pays considerable attention to criticism of his Ila people and the colonial system, and explains how and why the Ila and other tribes in Zambia should be open, tolerant and use their past to build large and diverse polities.

I am uneasy about the middle section of the book, namely Parts Two and Three and the ideas of 'entanglement' and 'dissent'. I understand 'entanglement' as the involvement or interaction of the local and the outsider, or global. What the editors call 'dissent History' in Part Three represents the aspirations of people who criticised colonial society but who did not emerge as leaders of postcolonial Africa. I therefore question whether the titles of these parts of the book are appropriate. I also find it inappropriate, especially in Part Two, to apply the term 'homespun' to scholars who made sense of or understood their local people after studying 'western knowledge'. Despite such reservations, it is clear what the editors and authors wished to achieve in this section of the book. In Part Two, contributors show that indigenous and non-native education can produce new and divergent knowledge. The

early or first generations of African historians discussed here were, in a sense, products of western education.

They excelled in understanding European history and only later began to study their own African societies. Their studies relied on the “colonial library” in the metropolises (good libraries did not exist in these African colonies) and they argued that African societies were run on same rational legal systems as those of the colonial European states. This argument of ‘sameness’ led to questions about why Europeans colonized and ruled Africa. It was also a stimulus for African nationalism because Africans challenged and resisted colonial rule. Many African scholars saw European rule as based on flawed reasoning, propaganda and distorted values. This interpretation is useful to understand Part Three where Peterson and Gordon examine those groups that rejected the emergent African independent state in the 1960s. John Lonsdale’s concluding chapter appeals for the recognition of patriotism, not as divisive tribalism, but as an asset to negotiate Africa’s liberal possibilities, or what he calls an ‘open frontier’. This chapter is a fine reflection and may be another farewell piece that rounds out Lonsdale’s exceptional scholarship on conflict and change in colonial and post-colonial Kenya since the 1970s.

This edited collection is rich in its diversity and comprehensive in its coverage. *Recasting the Past* is an excellent piece of research and synthesis. Its menu is diverse, and it nourishes a re-think of African History in the twenty-first century. The editors cast their net wide to solicit solid scholarship, and the product is a fine example of successful networking in African studies. This is a fine and highly cohesive collection.