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978-0-521-89971-0 - Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community

Sean Hanretta

Excerpt

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Introduction

THE CENTRAL EVENTS IN THIS STORY TOOK PLACE IN THE RIVER-side town of Kaédi in the French colony of Mauritania on February 15, 1930. That morning, two men, Mamadou Sadio and Dieydi Diagana, prayed together in a mosque in the neighborhood of Gattaga. Both members of the town's Soninke ethnic minority, Mamadou Sadio was the son of one of Kaédi's Islamic scholars, and Dieydi Diagana was the French-appointed *chef de village* for Gattaga, Kaédi's Soninke enclave. This day, in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan, was supposed to have been a day of reconciliation, for the two men had been on opposite sides of a conflict that had unsettled Kaédi for months and were praying together to demonstrate their commitment to peaceful coexistence.

The conflict had begun the previous August 1929, when a young man named Yacouba Sylla arrived in town and began preaching a message of religious and social reform that took Gattaga by storm. A Sufi teacher, Yacouba Sylla had incurred the hostility of the local representatives of the French Empire and the disdain of Kaédi's elite by calling for radical changes in social and religious practice and by claiming authority out of proportion to his age and his rather minimal formal education. He claimed instead to derive his authority from a controversial holy man named Ahmad Hamallah, from Nioro in Mali, who at the time was being detained by the French administration. Despite local opposition, Yacouba Sylla quickly gathered a large following from among Kaédi's minority Soninke population. Yacouba's supporters came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some were merchants; a few were important scholars; many were slaves or former slaves; others belonged to stigmatized occupational castes; some were merely poor. In December of 1929, the French deported Yacouba from Kaédi and then, in January, placed him in detention in Sassandra, in the colony of Côte d'Ivoire. In his absence, his followers continued to spread his ideas, and the religious revival became more intense. By January 1930, it involved over 600 people who had come into frequent and increasingly violent conflict with other residents of the town. Largely on the receiving end of much of the violence, Yacouba's followers were attacked in the town's streets and saw their homes burned and their shops looted.

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All this, however, was supposed to have been settled by the meeting in Gattaga's main mosque on the morning of February 15, 1930. Yet just hours later, apparently under the leadership of Mamadou Sadio who claimed to be acting in Yacouba's name, the revivalists staged a large demonstration, winding their way past their opponents' homes and shops and past the French administrative buildings. Though it is not clear exactly what happened during the course of that day, by the end of it nineteen men and three women, all followers of Yacouba Sylla, had been killed, shot by the town's guards. Several more died from their injuries over the next few days, while over 100 people were rounded up and arrested, sentenced to prison or detention, and exiled to the far corners of the French Empire in West Africa.¹

In the years that followed, Yacouba Sylla and his followers experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune. Despite the deaths and detentions, the group stayed in contact over the next several years, writing to one another from various prisons and assuring their families left behind that they would soon be together again. In the late 1930s, the administration gradually released the "Yacoubists"² and was surprised when most of them decided to gather in Côte d'Ivoire rather than return to Mauritania. Yacouba himself moved to the Ivoirian town of Gagnoa in 1939, established a center for Sufi devotional practices (called a *zâwiya*), and turned his attention to commerce and plantation agriculture. Gathering his followers around him to form a new community, they established a series of successful plantations and a transport company. By the 1940s, Yacouba was well known throughout much of West Africa as both a successful merchant and an important religious teacher. Relations between his followers and those of other religious leaders with ties to Hamallah in Niore were rarely smooth, but he attracted the attention of the great intellectual, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, and became friends with the politician Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and the latter relationship brought him

1 Arrêté 225, Gouv. -Gén. AOF (Carde), 27 January 1930, pub. *JOAOF*, February 15, 1930. See also Gouv. -Gén. AOF (Carde) to Min. Col., Rapport #133AP/2, 13 Avril 1930 and Arrêté 807, Gouv. -Gén. AOF 11 Avril 1930 (CAOM 1Affpol 2802/6 dossier 3). "Liste de Yacoubists décédés à Gattaga: 15-2-1930," (ANMt E2-34). A copy of this last file and others from Nouakchott were graciously provided to me by Professor Adama Gnokane of the Université de Nouakchott, to whom I am deeply indebted.

2 The name of the community created by Yacouba Sylla is a very contentious issue among his followers because of the implications it has for relations with other followers of Hamallah. See Boukary Savadogo, "La communauté 'Yacouba Sylla' et ses rapports avec la Tijāniyya hamawiyya," in *La Tijāniyya: Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, ed. Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (Paris, 2000), pp. 271–280. I have avoided using the term "Yacoubism," but since even those who emphatically reject the uniqueness of Yacouba's religious teachings accept that his followers' social organization was unprecedented, I have used the term "Yacoubists" to designate those who consider themselves to be members of the community of disciples of Shaykh Hamallah organized and led by Yacouba Sylla.

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into political life as a symbol for African entrepreneurialism and the drive for self-rule. An ally of Houphouët-Boigny's Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) and the pro-independence Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain in Mali, Yacouba Sylla was an important, if unobtrusive, figure in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Yacouba passed away on August 11, 1988, leaving behind him an influential community but little private wealth. Yacouba's followers had shunned all personal property, sharing all possessions in common and maintaining a tight solidarity. His sons inherited leadership of the community, playing significant political and religious roles in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire in the first decade of independence and remaining well-known figures throughout the region and among Francophone African Muslims in the diaspora.

Fascinating in its own right, the history of Yacouba Sylla and his followers provides a unique glimpse inside some of the most poorly understood dynamics of West African societies. Though hardly representative, the experiences of the Yacoubists refract the twentieth century in new and useful ways. French administrators had sought to systematically manage the practice of Islam in their African possessions in order to bring it into alignment with their vision of modernity and make it serve as a bulwark for the state's authority. At the same time, officials' half-hearted efforts to eliminate slavery, their inconsistent projects to channel labor into cash cropping, and the arbitrary exercise of power by poorly trained and underfunded administrators brought about dramatic and unexpected changes in the ways communities were organized and the ways individuals understood their position in society. West African Muslims were neither passive witnesses to these changes nor purely reactive. They drew creatively on centuries of Islamic thought and social experimentation to craft new identities and communities out of, among other things, the changes brought by the French. Administrators and colonial politicians spoke of freedom, development, and modernization in alien and often hollow terms; but the followers of Yacouba Sylla gave new meaning to these ideas, making them central themes in a mystical Sufi practice that looked little like the enlightenment-based liberal republicanism governors hoped to create or like the reformist Islam promoted by modernizers elsewhere. The Yacoubists used the memory of the suffering of the symbolic father whom they called "Ba Yaaxuba," "Father Yacouba," to fold the dominant ideologies of the century into a redemptive, cosmic narrative in which they themselves helped fulfill a social revolution set in motion by the Prophet Muhammad himself.

This book attempts to trace the origins and development of the "Yacoubist community" through the period of French colonial rule and up to the present. It is also an intellectual history of leaders and followers in the community that strives to illustrate the internal architecture of their thinking, its

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relevance for broad moral and theoretical questions, and the social and political uses to which it was put. I argue that the social and ideational roots of the revival launched by Yacouba Sylla in 1929, as well as of the new kind of society he helped establish in the late 1930s, can be traced back several centuries before his birth. The book illustrates the way the Yacoubists drew connections among phenomena that had their own histories stretching from the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the Sufi networks established by Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti in the eighteenth century, to the violent reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to the intellectual crisis precipitated by imperial conquest. The results suggest new ways of looking at the place of women and gender in Islamic history in West Africa, at the changes in labor regimes and local political patronage in the early twentieth century, at the new forms of religious practice that emerge along with the personalization and commoditization of spiritual authority, and at the complex circuits through which discourses like modernization and development traveled in becoming the common currency of postcolonial African political culture.

IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE AND THE COLONIAL EPISODE

In the late 1960s, the eminent scholar and leader of the “Ibadan” school of African history, J.F. Ade Ajayi, advised historians to remember that colonialism was merely “an episode” in the African past, albeit an important and traumatic one. Ajayi feared that the seductive pull of Europe’s interpretive vision and of the colonial archive as an empirical resource would drown out histories centered on “African” voices and worldviews.³ For many good reasons, Ajayi’s enjoinder and the nationalist historiographic moment of which it was a part hold little sway among current European and North American scholars of Africa. Like colonial analysts before them, nationalist historians tended to evaluate African cultures by comparing them to European ones. They deployed a series of interpretive dichotomies – between collaboration and resistance, between local and “world” religions, between capitalist and precapitalist economies, and so on – that made Ajayi’s distinction between Europe-centered histories and Africa-centered ones a distinction of essence and substance. They tended to downplay the impact of colonial transformations of political economy and ignored the way nationalist projects and their elite leaders had come to be saturated with colonialist ideologies.

In the face of these problems, a very different approach has come to dominate since the 1980s. Colonial rule is now seen as a tentative, halting

3 Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, “Colonialism: An Episode in African History,” reprinted in *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J. F. Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ, 2000), pp. 165–74.

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experiment, whose subjects were able to play a decisive role by facilitating certain courses of action while blocking or raising the relative costs of others. What was thought of as the precolonial past has been revealed as, in great measure, the product of an imagination shared by colonial observers and African elites, and reference to its explanatory value is seen as romantic at best, essentialist at worst. Instead, today's historians describe the interplay between colonial "projects" and African "responses" in ways that account for, and indeed relish, moments where African initiatives "disturbed" or "changed the trajectory" of European undertakings. Under the rubric of an "imperial turn," such work has had a salutary effect on European history, helping displace its own narratives of self-contained nations and autonomous colonial metropolises. In terms of African historiography, it has directed attention to the vibrancy and "modernity" of recent African societies and assimilated recognition of the impact of European rule without endorsing the self-representations of colonialists or their apologists.⁴

Steven Feierman has, however, noted that histories that are always cautious to frame African agency within the constraints and discourses of domination – and indeed, which deem it the height of agency to "displace" or "appropriate" those constraints and discourses – can reinforce the false universalism according to which only stories that employ explanatory contexts grounded in knowledge implicitly understood to be shared by the historian and her or his audience can be articulated in professionally acceptable languages. Historical objects depend on the other histories readers are assumed to know and those that a particular study is taken to inform. Dividing up the African twentieth century into stories that reflect the fate of European concepts, beliefs, or practices – like labor, commoditization, or citizenship – generates histories that have meaning only in their "shared relationship" to such concepts, reinforcing the coherence of European knowledge and the fragmentation of all others.⁵ The very act of referring to the continent in the early twentieth century as "colonial Africa" makes it clear that one must know

4 For the African cases, good introductions are Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), pp. 1516–1545; Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, UK, 1996); and Gregory Mann, "Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa," *AHR* 110:2 (2005). In a comparative context, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton, 1994); Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, A Reader* (Manchester, 2000); and Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005).

5 This is the powerful argument of Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1999), p. 185.

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something about colonialism (and thus about Europe) to understand it, while the concrete knowledge about Africa mobilized by “imperial turn” histories of Europe is comparatively thin. Knowledge of, say, French history has applicability and meaning in many locations outside the metropole, while knowledge of “local” African history is taken to gain meaning only by being connected to “broader” circuits. Regional or even continental interactions are overlooked in favor of localized studies where the interplay of appropriation and displacement can become a major part of the story, or “translocal” studies where appropriation and displacement *are* the story. Integration in African history – indeed, the meaning of the field as a whole – only comes through the colonial rubric.

One reason for this is that Africa as such has proven largely unsatisfactory as an alternative framework for historical analysis. Partially this is because the continent’s size and diversity mean that the ground that it provides for narratives is typically thin; partially it is because “Africa” as a category owes so much to Europe itself that the idea that it can provide an alternative locus of explanation is probably illusory.⁶ The choice between treating African history as part of a fully integrated, universally intelligible world history and separating it out completely, relegating it to the timeless past of the “other,” is, however, a false one, one that ultimately serves to justify the neglect of contextualizing knowledge that could build on stories centered outside the metropole. It is a duality that has particularly pernicious consequences for African intellectual history, which can be nothing other than the history of derivative discourses, and for the history of Muslim peoples in Africa, whose long-term trajectories, insofar as they are considered at all, are attached like an appendage to the Middle East. For that reason, this book adopts instead a regional approach, taking the loosely bounded area of the “Western Sudan” – roughly from the Senegal River Valley in the west to the bend of the Niger River in the east, from the desert in the north to the southernmost extent of Mande-speaking traders – as its setting, not in the sense of a culture zone that offers ready-made explanations or bounded repertoires, but as a privileged space for the interconnection and accumulation of stories.

Although the new colonial and imperial histories have generally paid little attention to questions of Islamic reform or Muslim social change, the most innovative works on Islam in twentieth-century West Africa have been broadly consonant with such approaches. They have emphasized the ways the socioeconomic and political dispensations ushered in by European rule spurred the development of new forms of religious authority and new

6 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997), ch. 4. That “Europe” is equally tendentious a category has, of course, been one of the greatest incentives for turning instead to “empire.”

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religious institutions.⁷ Even those historians who work across the colonial divide tend to privilege the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, seeing in them a profound rupture in which older, dead-end forms of Islamic authority and organization were replaced, in a kind of a “shakeout,” by modern ones better adapted to the new conditions of European liberalism and capitalist development.⁸

The same basic pattern is apparent in large-scale studies of socioeconomic change in the twentieth century, particularly in those that focus on the question of “free labor.” Abandoning older debates about whether precolonial African labor was “overexploited” or “underutilized,” or over the conditions for the emergence of a modern working class, more recent approaches have lingered over the complex, heterogeneous patterns that emerged in the twentieth century. They have highlighted the colonial use of forced labor and coercive military recruitment, which they present as an “intermediary” stage between premodern labor regimes and true labor markets. Attention is given to the political, social, and legal institutions that enabled the functioning of these hybrid forms of political economy, which in turn appear as effectively *sui generis*.⁹ Yet there has been little investigation into the meanings of work within African societies, so powerful is the implicit teleology of the inexorable progression toward liberal capitalism.¹⁰

Decades ago, Sara Berry suggested that the development of a satisfactory interpretation of the transformation of African economies during the colonial period would be best served by recognizing that economic values are the “outcome of historical interaction between practices and concepts of production” with

7 On the personalization of religious authority, see the contributions to Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson, eds., *Le temps des marabouts: itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française*, v. 1880–1960 (Paris, 1997); and Benjamin F. Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor, 2005). For new institutions, see those as well as the essays in Robinson and Triaud, *La Tijaniyya*; David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens, OH, 2000); and Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in A West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN, 2001). Brenner’s earlier work generally took its frame of reference from local religious traditions rather than from French colonial policy, but *Controlling Knowledge* bears traces of the imperial turn in its focus on European conquest as marking a fundamental epistemic rupture in Islamic discourse. The most important works of the older, philological school of Islamic studies are exceptions to this trend, but they generally take very little notice of the colonial state or questions of social and political authority at all.

8 This is the basic thesis that David Robinson has put forth across a number of publications during the last several years. See the most mature expression of it, in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

9 This is the overarching argument of the major work of one of the founders of the new colonial history, Frederick Cooper, although it is also a perspective shared by many historians of slavery. See Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*. See also Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, 2005).

10 For an exception that proves the rule, see Johannes Fabian, “Kazi: Conceptualizations of Labor in a Charismatic Movement among Swahili-speaking Workers,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 13:50 (1973), 293–325.

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“modes of understanding” conceived of as “objects of accumulation” (and, presumably, production).¹¹ However, historians have generally avoided investigating these “variable ideas” as part of any kind of intellectual tradition, with its own tensions and dynamics, and have rather presented them either as elements of an ideology crafted to provide legitimating cover for coexisting social relations or as an abstract “culture” whose logic can be charted and then properly inserted into standard economic models. As a result, social historians have limited the power of their insights, reducing local capitalist transformations to deviations from Western paths of development and accounting for such deviations by implicit reference either to a local or regional essence or to a global structural imbalance. In Berry’s groundbreaking *Fathers Work for their Sons*, for example, non-Western economic ways of assigning “value” became, together with colonial rule, explanations for the unproductive nature of African forms of accumulation, for the lack of “effective management” of the means of production, for the persistence of exploitation, the growth of a powerful but factionalized state, and the lack of both proletarian solidarity or any kind of alternative way to organize resistance to class structures.¹²

The same problems beset approaches that take their cue from literary theory, particularly as inflected through postcolonial theory. Brent Hayes Edwards, for example, has drawn attention to W.E.B. DuBois’s marvelous phrase that since “with nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow,” one can “read the riddle of Europe . . . as a matter of colonial shadows.”¹³ Important figures in one of the most dramatic episodes in French Islamic policy in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, emblems of the success of France’s encouragement of small-scale agricultural capitalism in the 1930s and 1940s, and influential power brokers during the transition from colony to postcolony in the 1950s and 1960s, the history of the community of Yacouba Sylla can indeed stand as a kind of shadow to the history of the French endeavor in West Africa. But whereas Edwards sees a historiography perched in these shadows – indeed a history so dim as to be virtually invisible – as a way of turning from “oppositions and binaries” to the “layers” produced by tracing the adversarial networks of resistance to colonial rule, such negation simply reproduces the invisibility into which colonialism and its representations have cast African history. Tellingly, Edwards claims that such dissonant voices can only be found “within the institution, within the archive,” and, following Gayatri Spivak, that their articulation comes only “at the limit point where ‘history is

¹¹ Sara Berry, *Fathers Work for their Sons: Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yorùbá Community* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 61–62.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 11–14, 81–83.

¹³ Quoted in Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Shadow of Shadows,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11:1 (2003), p. 41.

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narrativized into logic.” Such assertions simply reproduce the colonial fantasy that its archives were total and its power ubiquitous, along with the colonial paranoia that this power was everywhere subject to challenge. Spivak’s assumption that there is only one way that history can be “narrativized into logic” and that this is the point where metropolitan systems of explanation attempt to organize subaltern consciousness, simply reproduces the formalist desire that narratives and explanatory logic be mutually determining.¹⁴

Even those who acknowledge the heterogeneity and limitations of colonial rule reify the period itself, taking for granted its status as a distinctive and total experience in which administrative discourses and visions seeped into every facet of social life.¹⁵ Particularly powerful imaginings of coloniality have, for instance, organized their analyses not in terms of projects, displacements, and appropriations, but rather in terms of the “entanglements” that emerged as African systems of meaning and order were (often violently) taken apart and woven into new, syncretic structures. Such a method lends itself to multifaceted depictions of social change that avoid positing “European” and “local” knowledge or practices as distinct spheres. The analysis that results is, however, fundamentally synchronic; exploring the processes by which colonial knots came to be tied in the first place is eschewed in favor of “tracing” entangled objects and logics back and forth from one register to another. Change, insofar as it is present at all, is either attributed abstractly to conquest or to subsequent structural adjustments within the relationships among people and things. By shifting the scale to “micropolitics” and iterated daily practices, such studies fail to account for the purported necessary relationship between entanglement and coloniality in the first place. The narrower its temporal biography becomes, the more colonialism ironically turns into a setting detached from any specific set of actors but one that completely accounts for the actions that take place on its stage.¹⁶ Recent calls by

14 Ibid., p. 42. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), p. 207.

15 As with the works of Cooper cited above, or of Jean and John Comaroff, Gaurav Desai, etc.

16 Nancy Rose Hunt’s *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, 1999) is the most sophisticated example of this approach, and both its title and organization reflect its commitment to describing the assemblages of microprocesses that made up the colonial situation. To trace one subsequent genealogy, Lynn M. Thomas brought the metaphor of entanglement from the works of Nicholas Thomas, Carolyn Hamilton, and Achille Mbembe into her *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, 2003), which in turn provided a key conceptual tool for Julie Livingston’s *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, 2005). The impression that these studies are themselves isomorphic with “snapshots” of the large-scale processes described by Gramscianists may reflect their shared debt to Steven Feierman’s work, especially “Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa,” *African Studies Review* 28:2–3 (1985), 73–147; and *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990).

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historians like Frederick Cooper to adopt this method as a way of looking at a tightly bounded colonial period without ideological “stances”¹⁷ are, in this sense, simply the displacement of the depoliticizing approaches to the post-colonial period circulated a decade ago that viewed a whole series of specific state institutions in Africa through the lens of various generalized “conditions” or systems.¹⁸ Both ultimately sustain little investigation into processes that take place outside what is assumed to be the proper domain of apparently self-evident periods.

Ongoing modifications in the theory and practice of the new colonial histories have uncovered ever more complex and subtle forms of African agency, and more intricate entanglements between various places in Africa and the rest of the world. But Feierman’s insight reveals that the contextualism that would assert the inextricability of European presence from twentieth-century processes, so that both metropole and colony are seen as constituted by a shared imperial moment (or, increasingly, a global moment), is in fact highly arbitrary. At issue is not the connectedness of sets of events – it is probably a truism that virtually any two events can be connected if we trace linkages assiduously enough – but rather the insistence with which certain connections are foregrounded as necessary for making sense of phenomena.¹⁹ Some scholars have responded by pointing to the ways the changes brought by colonial rule were limited by the persistence of African institutions.²⁰ Yet the solution is not to be found either in minimizing the impact of colonialism on African societies, or romanticizing African “agency” to the point that, as Mahmoud Mamdani has warned, “modern imperialism is – should I say celebrated? – as the outcome of an African initiative.”²¹ Without a doubt, colonial rule was a process in which elements of what social scientists might consider agency were appropriated from many individuals, and the ability of most social groups to participate fully in shaping and directing public institutions was foreclosed. But what this suggests is that the concept of agency itself is part of the problem.²² What remains invisible is the possibility of African inventions in social technology, political rhetoric, and self-fashioning

¹⁷ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, esp. introduction.

¹⁸ Such as Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Bloomington, 1999).

¹⁹ Comp. Christopher Pinney, “Things Happen: Or, From Which Moment Does That Object Come?” in *Materiality (Politics, History and Culture)*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, 2005), pp. 256–272.

²⁰ Thomas Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *JAH* 44 (2003), 3–27; Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

²¹ Mahmoud Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996), p. 10.

²² See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003), 113–124.