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978-0-521-77241-9 - Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present

Frederick Cooper

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Africa Since 1940

The Past of the Present

Frederick Cooper's latest book on the history of decolonization and independence in Africa initiates a new textbook series: New Approaches to African History. His book will help readers understand the historical processes which have shaped Africa's current position in the world. Covering the last half-century, it bridges the divide between colonial and post-colonial history, allowing readers to see just what political independence did and did not signify. The book follows the "development question" across time, seeing how first colonial regimes and then African governments sought to transform African societies in their own ways. Readers will see how men and women, peasants and workers, religious leaders and local leaders found space within the crevices of state power to refashion the way they lived, worked, and interacted with each other. And they will see that the effort to turn colonial territories into independent nation-states was only one of the ways in which radical political and social movements imagined their future and how deeply the claims of such movements continued to challenge states after independence. By looking at the post-war era as a whole, one can begin to understand the succession of crises that colonial and post-colonial states faced without getting into a sterile debate over whether a colonial "legacy" or the failings of African governments are the cause of Africa's current situation.

Frederick Cooper is Professor of African History at New York University and former Chair of the Department of History at the University of Michigan. He is a well known and much admired figure in African studies worldwide. His recent publications include *Decolonization and African Society*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1996, plus numerous articles on labor, social movements, decolonization, and development.

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Preface

It is now forty years since the exciting, hopeful days when most French, British, and Belgian colonies emerged as independent states. Still, much writing on politics, development, or other aspects of contemporary Africa treats this period, or the post-World War II era generally, more as background than as a subject for consideration, while most textbooks and many courses in African history treat this period more as an epilogue than as a full part of the continent's history. The present book attempts to meet the needs of general readers, students, and teachers who would like to do more than that, who want to look at the past of the present in a more coherent way. The dividing line between colonial and independence eras is sometimes thought of so axiomatically that no one asks just what difference acquiring sovereignty made – especially given the continued inequalities of the world order – and just what processes unfolded over a longer time frame. In many ways, the time of World War II (really the late 1930s through the late 1940s) is as important a break point as the moment of independence. More precisely, different aspects of African history present different rhythms and ruptures, different continuities, adaptations, and innovations – a theme developed in the “Interlude”. The book is organized to promote discussion of such issues. *Africa Since 1940* is thus intended for readers with an interest in both history and current affairs, to encourage the former to look farther forward – to see that history doesn't come to an end point – and the latter to look farther backward – to see that the unfolding of processes over time is essential to understanding the present. I have written this book both within and against the genre of a textbook. Within, because it is intended for readers, students and others, who seek an introduction to a subject and who are not presumed to have prior knowledge of it, and against, because I have eschewed both the comprehensiveness and the blandness characteristic of textbooks. In putting themes ahead of coverage, readers may find that a part of Africa that particularly interests them, say Ethiopia, is neglected, but they should find that it is easier to obtain specific information elsewhere than it is to find a framework through which to analyze

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and debate the post-war period as a whole. The choice of examples is shaped both by what I know – and there is more to know about Africa than any one scholar can assimilate – and by what works well within the thematic structure and space constraints of the book. Such choices should not be taken to mean that one part of Africa is more interesting or important than any other. *Africa Since 1940* is as much an interpretive essay as a textbook, and its contents are intended more to provoke discussion than to be learned. It is argumentative and even opinionated, but I know of no other way to write African history than to do so from my own point of view and to acknowledge that it is one among many ways of approaching the subject.

Each chapter is followed by a short list of suggested readings. However, a more comprehensive bibliography, keyed to the chapters of this book, is available on Cambridge University Press's website at <http://uk.cambridge.org/resources/0521776007>. In addition to allowing a longer bibliography than the constraints of print allow, use of the web allows for periodic updating as new scholarship appears.

It was Martin Klein's innovative idea for a series of modular texts on different themes of African history that inspired me to write this book, and my attempt to make it accessible to students of political science, development, and perhaps world history as well is, I think, compatible with Marty's goals for the series. I am grateful to Marty and to his advisory committee for several rounds of suggestions on my prospectus and the draft of the book. I would also like to thank Mamadou Diouf, Devra Coren, Nancy Hunt, Andrew Ivaska, David Newbury, Luise White, and Jennifer Widner for their helpful critiques of earlier drafts.

Devra Coren's skills in building and using databases and presenting them graphically deserve the credit for the figures and tables presented in chapter 5. I am grateful to Agence France Presse, Documentation Française, Bettmann/CORBIS, and the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archive of the National Museum of African Art of the Smithsonian Institution for permission to reproduce photographs. I am also grateful to the staff of the Map Room at the University of Michigan Library, and particularly Karl Longstreth and Chad Weinberg, for working with me on the maps.



Map 1 Africa: countries and cities, c. 2000