The Idea of Development in Africa

The Idea of Development in Africa challenges prevailing international development discourses about the continent by tracing the history of ideas, practices, and “problems” of development used in Africa. In doing so, it offers an innovative approach to examining the history and culture of development through the lens of the development episteme, which has been foundational to the “idea of Africa” in western discourses since the early 1800s. This study weaves together an historical narrative of how the idea of development emerged with an account of the policies and practices of development in colonial and postcolonial Africa. This book highlights four enduring themes in African development, including their present-day ramifications: domesticity, education, health, and industrialization. Offering a balance between historical overview and analysis of past and present case studies, Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon demonstrate that Africans have always co-opted, challenged, and reformed the idea of development, even as the western-centric development episteme presumes a one-way flow of ideas and funding from the west to Africa.

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New Approaches to African History is designed to introduce students to current findings and new ideas in African history. Although each book treats a particular case and is able to stand alone, the format allows the studies to be used as modules in general courses on African history and world history. The cases represent a wide range of topics. Each volume summarizes the state of knowledge on a particular subject for a student who is new to the field. However, the aim is not simply to present views of the literature but also to introduce debates on historiographical or substantive issues, and individual studies may argue for a particular point of view. The aim of the series is to stimulate debate and to challenge students and general readers. The series is not committed to any particular school of thought.

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We faced many challenges writing this book, in part because of the strongly held belief among some scholars that a history of development in Africa should convey a teleological history of economic progress. We were never going to write that book. Nonetheless, we appreciate all the feedback we received from anonymous reviewers – both positive and negative – as it helped us articulate our intentions more clearly and ground our arguments more firmly in the historical evidence. We are especially grateful to our series editor, Martin Klein, and to Cambridge University Press editors Maria Marsh and Dan Brown for their encouragement and guidance throughout the process. In particular, Martin Klein’s painstaking reading of multiple drafts offered invaluable insights. Also, we are very thankful to Stephanie Taylor, Atifa Jiwa, Allan Alphonse, and Ami Naramor for making the final production of this book possible.

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MAP 0.1 Africa ca. 1830
MAP 0.2 Africa ca. 1914