Madagascan Insurrection

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The picture that emerges is one of division rather than unity; of vested interest and personality clashes rather than the binding commitment of shared idealism. Spencer’s African nationalism has lost the glint of Foul’s Gold, polished too vigorously by an earlier generation, and stands bare as a more gritty politics of compromise. Although the KAU ‘had changed the political history of Kenya’ by the time of the declaration of the Emergency in 1952, it had hardly succeeded in forging nationalist politics in the colony. Nationalist politics were, in reality, a product of the post-Mau Mau period. Yet it was the former activists of the KAU, in alliance with others, who ultimately gave leadership and direction to the nationalist politics that brought Kenya to independence. The importance of the KAU and its principal members is therefore undeniable.

What we sometimes lose sight of, in the dense and elaborate detail of Kikuyu political intrigues, is the broader picture: these events only make sense if seen in the context of Kenya’s evolving political economy, and greater attention could have been paid to integrating the various levels of analysis to make the book more accessible to the non-specialist. As it stands, this book will appeal most readily to those who already know a good deal about Kenya, but it is to be hoped that other Africanists will read it, and perhaps pursue similar research on the growth and emergence of African politics in other territories. Only with detailed study of African politics in the colonial period will we be able to make the necessary, and already overdue, historical reassessments of African nationalism.

D.M.A.

MADAGASCAN INSURRECTION


The insurrection in eastern Madagascar in 1947 was arguably the first modern nationalist rising against colonial rule in Africa. It was also one of the most tragic, and remains one of the most puzzling. Students of African history will therefore welcome this new edition of Jacques Tronchon’s book on the subject, first published by Maspero in 1974, too little-known outside specialist circles and still the only scholarly work on the subject.

The rising in Madagascar was the first post-war threat to France’s empire, shortly to be followed by Indochina and Algeria. As so often in Madagascar’s rather introverted history, events were out-of-phase with other parts of the world. The insurgents were hopelessly ill-equipped to succeed in their aim of gaining independence. They were isolated from the world at a time when few French policy-makers were thinking in terms of decolonization but, brutalized by their own experiences of World War, were determined to restore France to its position in the world. The result was consequently a bloody failure for the Malagasy insurgents. The repression was one of the most shameful episodes in French colonial history, and to this day both French and Malagasy survivors are most unwilling to talk about these dreadful times. When Jacques Tronchon researched this book, in the early 1970s, he achieved a great feat in identifying and interviewing some 200 survivors. He also build up a considerable private library of documents which he has turned into an archive for scholars. But despite his best endeavours he ran up against something resembling a brick wall when it came to official archives.

The mysteries surrounding 1947, together with the subtleties of Madagascar’s
own original and somewhat opaque political culture, mean that the author has to devote a large part of his book to stripping away the myths surrounding the events. He starts with a brief narrative, and then goes on to discuss the explanations of contemporaries before advancing his own appreciation of the insurrection’s causes and significance. It is in some ways a pity that over half the book, which began life as a doctoral thesis, is taken up with annexes of historical documents. Interesting though many documents are, and invaluable as tools for future research, it might have been better to have had more of Dr Tronchon’s own judicious analysis, which is written in clear and simple French.

Overall, Jacques Tronchon’s achievement is to present the broad outline of what happened in 1947 in a way which clears the field of stones and dead wood, making it more fertile for future research. Our knowledge of modern Malagasy nationalism has been considerably advanced in recent years, notably by the thesis of Solofa Randrianja on the inter-war years, sadly unpublished as yet. Perhaps the most fruitful way forward now would be through local studies which would tell us precisely why certain localities participated in the insurrection, and who exactly the insurgents were.

London

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BLAMING THE BRITISH

Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development? Edited by Toyin Falola.

Here are thirteen essays by nine like-minded Nigerian authors; four of them, including the editor, at the University of Ife, one at Jos, one at Lagos, one at Nsukka, and two with no stated academic affiliation. The book will serve to remind economic historians who deal with Nigeria how unfavourably the colonial experience is looked upon by some academics in that country. The directions taken are clearly laid out on p. 3 of the Introduction, where Toyin Falola and J. Ihonvbere ascribe to the British colonizers these present-day results of their tenure in Nigeria: ‘poverty, class contradictions, institutional decay, unstable state structures, low accumulative capacity, undeveloped social classes, co-existence of modes of production, illiteracy, in fact all the features of under-developed and peripheralised social formations in the international division of labour.’

Many of the chapters adhere to the ‘core and periphery’ approach to international trade. The colonial encouragement of an export trade in cash crops is seen as leading to an unequal exchange, with Nigeria’s cash crop exports accruing to the benefit mainly of Europe: ‘Agricultural exports were perhaps the most important aspect of the British programme of exploitation’ (p. 80). The consequence, it is argued, was stagnation for current Nigerian agriculture. The quid pro quo for these exports was imports of consumer goods (‘meretricious goods’, as the author of one of the chapters puts it, ‘parading...in all corners of the country’). These imports are seen as leading to an unhelpful creation of new wants, and as dumping that ruined local production. Education is described as a means ‘to create the necessary tastes in order to ensure constant profits for British capitalists’ (p. 26). The good effects of schools, hospitals, roads, law and order, and the English language are viewed here ‘at best...either as unintended or simply to facilitate the penetration of the hinterland, the management of contradictions and the furtherance of exploitation and incorporation’ (p. 28).

The twelve chapters of compilation and synthesis that follow the introduction are reasonably straightforward in presenting evidence. The indubitable cases