

## Book review

**Critical terms for the study of Africa, by Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier (eds), Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2018, 410 pp., \$ 32.50, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-54897-5 (paper).**

*Critical terms for the study of Africa* is a collection of 25 articles that aims, as the editors state in their introduction, 'to sharpen, rethink, modulate, and sometimes jettison the conceptual frames with which we have studied Africa's pasts, presents and futures' (p. 6).

The 25 terms that have been selected for this exercise, in alphabetic order are:

Africa/African, Belonging, Bondage, Citizenship, Colonialism, Design, Environment, Evidence, Gender and Sexuality, Governance, Health, Humanitarianism, Labour, Liberation, Mobility, Modernity, Narrative, Performance, Population, Spirit, Theory, Value, Vernacular, Violence, and Witchcraft. The choice of these terms is not meant to be comprehensive and some terms that one would expect are missing or have been replaced by other terms for reasons explained in the introduction. 'Slavery' for example, a hotly debated term today, has been replaced by 'bondage' to make a more inclusive discussion of unfree labour possible.

It took me 25 days to read the 25 chapters, in this review I pick out three terms that drew my attention. Maano Ramutsindela from Cape Town University, writing about 'environment', explores how the various meanings of environment have evolved in the African economic and political context. Over the past decades, the term has exploded into a wide variety of meanings and usages. It has become a prism through which society and nature are juxtaposed and inequalities between and within societies are expressed. It offers a platform where societal and political interests are contested and (re)distributed. The author speaks of 'social hierarchies of landscape,' referring to the imaging of the wilderness as a terrain of beasts and primitive people in need of Western civilization. But this wilderness is also a paradise of peace and beauty for – mainly foreign – elites, which leads to

the creation of nature reserves and the removal of local inhabitants to make room for wildlife. The African environment has always been the concern of outsiders such as tourists and international environmentalists, at the expense of those whose daily habitat it is, or rather, was.

Simon Gikandi, a Kenyan professor of English based in Princeton, takes issue with the term 'modernity', the most hodiecentric (today-centred) concept one can think of. Gikandi criticizes the assumption that modernism, as a synonym for development, was brought to Africa from the West through the creation of modern institutions such as schools, hospitals, governments and cities. These in turn are claimed to have produced modern Africans. The author argues that colonial modernity rather retarded African modernity by turning people away from Africa. The paradox, writes Gikandi, is that colonialism 'modernized' African society to serve its own needs (p. 135). Striking and equally paradoxical is that the author resorts to Western authors such as Kant, Freud, Lukács and Habermas to buttress his argument. Julius Nyerere and Jomo Kenyatta are two African leaders who are mentioned for their attempts to foster an African identity that emerged out of the modernization of tradition.

Derk Peterson, historian and Africanist at Michigan University, writes an informative chapter about 'vernacular' (indigenous African) languages, a topic that may be less familiar to the average student of Africa. At first sight, it seems to be the only 'truly African' chapter, because local languages are largely inaccessible to non-Africans (including anthropologists). African languages seem to dodge the leading thought of the book: that Western colonialism and its aftermath imposed its cultural, political and technical vocabulary onto Africa and thus contributed to the de-Africanization of the continent. But Peterson shows that even here colonialism played a significant role. Missionaries were the first visitors to take an interest in vernacular languages in their attempt to introduce their Bible to Africans who did not speak a European language. Secondly, linguists found in Africa a fascinating terrain for comparative studies. Above all, promoting and standardizing vernaculars suited the political philosophy of indirect rule. Nonetheless, written and printed vernaculars provided literate people with a space to communicate with domestic audiences outside of the direct control of

colonial authorities. Ironically, however, vernacular texts are now far less accessed by all levels of African citizens than texts in European languages. Today, many Africans are near-illiterate in their own language; a sobering observation that Peterson, however, does not make.

*Critical Terms* is without doubt an enriching and provoking contribution to the liberation of African studies from foreign hegemonies, but the enterprise remains somewhat self-contradictory and confusing. Why should we demarcate and set apart a geographical area as a field with sufficient coherence to be the topic of a publication such as this one? More urgent is the question of why we should believe authors, who themselves are the products of colonization and globalization, when they criticize the colonial and global alienation of their continent (if it is *their* continent; the large majority of the authors are non-Africans). And why should we try to redeem African traditions while we recognize that Africa is and has always been a vital part of the – continuously changing – world? These critical concluding remarks about the possibly atavistic leaning of this collection are not, however, meant to dismiss its main argument. They are rather kindled and inspired by the dilemmas that the authors themselves discuss.

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