

BOOK REVIEW

Toyin Falola. *A History of West Africa*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023. xii + 503 pp. \$153.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9781032055961.


The book illuminates the changes and continuities in the economic, socio-political and cultural matrix of West Africa since precolonial times. Falola reiterates the values and nature of history in traditional African societies. History in traditional African societies, he noted, was preserved and transmitted in oral traditions. The book also gives a detailed analysis of the human and material resources of West Africa taking into account the vegetation, soil, economic activities, and indigenous language families. The book traces the evolution of West African development trajectories in three distinct phases: the Stone Age, Neolithic Revolution, and Iron Age. While the transition from a Stone to an Iron Age economy marked a watershed in the annals of West African history, there is a lacuna in the archaeological literature on the Bronze Age phase as substantial evidence of its period remains, largely, uncovered. In Chapter Six, the book examines the materiality and temporality of the Saharan desert and its contributions to regional and global development. During the precolonial era, trade across the Saharan desert was properly organized with routes and caravan settings. The management of the Saharan desert and its resources gave fecundity to the rise of powerful empires including Islamic movements within the region. In the ensuing chapters, the author explores the nature and features of the domestic economy and argues that out of the four factors of production—land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship—land and labor were the most important because of their especial importance for human survival and agricultural production.

In Part Three of the book, the author examines the origin and spread of Islam across Africa detailing the actors, patterns, and modes of proselytization and conversion including impact on the people, economy, and society. The author challenges the popular narrative in the literature, which claims that Islam won most converts in Africa through wars and conquests. He opines that during the early phase of Islam, marriage, scholarships, trade, and diplomacy served as peaceful strategies of conversion in West Africa. The Jihadi epoch, despite its negative consequences, particularly in terms of human rights violations and social disorder, was a distinct phase, aimed to revive and expand Islamic teachings across the region. What is more, the book documents the evolution of Christianity in the region, taking into consideration the actors and impact of missionaries on the economy and society. The book points to the activities of Prince Henry the Navigator who traversed the Cape of Good Hope and the Portuguese missionaries who left indelible footprints in coastal regions.

More specifically, the book documents the activities of the Catholic Church—their missions and the contributions of freed slaves to the spread of Christianity, especially in the hinterland, were isolated and analyzed. Also, the role of African independent churches (AICs) in localizing or Africanizing Christianity through the local practice and performativity of spiritual powers especially in healing, the author argues, were borrowed and adapted cultures from African traditional religions. The AICs, Falola noted, engaged in the reinterpretation of bibles to validate traditional African religious concepts/beliefs. Besides, the book examines the causes and impact of the horrendous Trans-Atlantic slave trade and how it disrupted the socio-economic development of Africa. The book further provides fresh perspectives on the emergence of legitimate commerce and how trade in agriculture led to the exploitation of the locals.

In Part Four and Five, the author demonstrates how the European colonialists gained fuller knowledge of the people and society of West Africa, which ultimately enabled them to devise effective politico-economic strategies of colonial occupation. Falola examines the direct and indirect colonial policies and highlighted their negative consequences. The book shows how forceful military recruitment during the world wars disrupted the economy and society of West Africa. More importantly, the book engages with the crises of development in postcolonial West Africa locating the roots of regional socio-economic and political quagmires in the European colonial occupation of West Africa. Post-colonial civilian and military leaderships have not shown pragmatic leadership needed to transform the fortunes of the region as can be seen in incessant military coups, electoral frauds, burgeoning debt burden, youth unemployment, hunger, and malnutrition. In fact, the neocolonial policies of the Global North countries and their agents, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, have continued to undermine sustainable development of West Africa. Addressing the melange of development challenges ravaging West Africa will require a multi-pronged approach couched in effective regional integration, agricultural mechanization, and industrialization, rule of law, women empowerment, and cultural renaissance. Culturally, Falola notes that Africans must jettison attempts to become “pseudo-Europeans” through the adoption and promotion of indigenous culture and philosophy. Hybridization, rather than decolonization, is suggested as a feasible approach.

Written in a clear and simple language, this book is an indispensable resource for understanding West African history. The inclusion of an “assessment section” further enhances its value for teachers and students of West African history. Above all, this book is meticulously researched and thorough in its coverage.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2024.198