

Book Reviews



Corrie DECKER/Elisabeth MCMAHON, *The Idea of Development in Africa*.

A History. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2021. Pp. 333. Paperback: \$22.99, ISBN 9781107503229.

The title is the first hint that *The Idea of Development in Africa* by American historians Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon is a book of significance. As readers familiar with African studies will recognise and the authors explain, it is a nod to Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Idea of Africa*. In that seminal book, Mudimbe made the case that the very idea of Africa is rooted in Western thinking, where Africa is “a paradigm of difference” and constructed as Europe's “own negated double”. In *The Idea of Development in Africa*, Decker and McMahon see the idea of “development” as rooted in Western thinking – even if it has been shaped by Africans as well – and they see Mudimbe's “idea of Africa” and what they call “the development episteme” as inherent to each other.

The development episteme is the core idea of the book. It “refers to the knowledge system that claims there are real, measurable differences in ‘development’ between nations, societies, or social groups” (p. 3). By providing an overview of its historical foundations and how it gave shape to “the idea of development”, Decker and McMahon aim “to engage readers in a conversation about how and why international development efforts in Africa have historically had ambiguous results, and why we need to challenge the basic assumption underlying our contemporary idea of development” (p. 3).

The Idea of Development in Africa features twelve chapters, which are organised into three parts, as well as an introduction and an epilogue. The development episteme is introduced starting in the introduction, and the three parts focus on its origins, implementation and selected areas of intervention. Correspondingly, development is used in three different, but interrelated, ways: referring to the creation of knowledge about Africa, specific policies and practices imposed in Africa, and a discourse of power inflicted on Africa, mainly by

people who are not themselves African. The epilogue draws on African scholarship to make a case for the decolonisation of development.

The broad understanding of development outlined in Part I provides context and nuance to the prevailing view that development emerged after the Second World War. Linking the idea of development to ideas such as progress, capitalism and race reveals linkages and parallels between imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism and development as ideas and practices.

Part II examines development policies and practices. The first three chapters present a history of state-led development and public welfare in colonial and postcolonial Africa up until the 1980s. The fourth chapter, Chapter 8, “examines the shift in nongovernmental interventions in Africa’s development from the civilizing mission of the late nineteenth century to the ‘NGOization’ of African development in the twenty-first” (p. 165). While a vibrant civil society is generally seen as a sign of a working democracy, Decker and McMahon point out that “the assumption in such a statement is that civil society consists primarily of citizens” (p. 177). Yet, they argue, “the majority of the organizations, institutions, and people that have comprised ‘civil society’ in African countries originated in the west; they were not citizens of African countries. Even where citizens, locally owned businesses, and national or community-based religious organizations have actively participated ... one often discovers the overwhelming influence of foreign financing and directives” (p. 177). This is compelling, but I am left wondering how African religious communities’ welfare and development practices fit into the picture. Overall, I suspect that readers of *Religion & Development* will find Chapter 8 particularly useful to think with and against.

Part III features chapters on housing, education, health and industrialisation. The chapters show how development practice tends to be premised on foreign knowledge and fails to consider the knowledge, experience, culture and viewpoints of those it impacts. The four chapters skilfully put historical and contemporary examples in dialogue, revealing long lines, but leaving little space for details. In Chapter 12, the best examples in this part of the book illustrate how “African industrialization and economic development does not always (and does not have to) look like western modernity” (p. 253). African agency comes to the fore, and *The Idea of Development in Africa* moves beyond critique of development to show what decolonising development can mean in practice.

A more critical review could have argued that the book kicks in some open doors. The long view of development espoused, for example, has a predecessor in historians and development scholars Michael P. Cowen and Robert W. Shenton’s ‘The Invention of Development’ (whose title, incidentally, evokes the title of the better known prequel to *The Idea of Africa*, *The Invention of*

Africa). It could have been critical of the implicit binary between “African” and “Western” featuring throughout the book – and this review. (Chapter 4 touches on this, but it is left unresolved.) Furthermore, the book has more to say about anglophone and francophone Africa than other parts of the continent, and some examples seem more relevant to Decker and McMahon’s American context than to development or Africa. However, none of these critiques change how *The Idea of Development in Africa* is a timely and thorough history of development in Africa that deserves the readership it can get.

The Idea of Development in Africa will be excellent as reading in courses in development studies and African studies, especially on advanced levels, where the whole book or selected chapters can be paired with in-depth case studies to challenge students to consider the long lines of history. It should be read by development practitioners who want to understand decolonisation, and perhaps even more by those who do not. It will give those caught up in the jargon of development goals and other development fads space to reflect on the configurations of knowledge and power underlying their work, the history of these configurations, and what alternatives might look like.

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