



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

Northrup, David. 2017. Seven Myths of Africa in World History. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. 162 pp. ISBN 978-1-62466-640-7 (cloth), 978-1-62466-639-1 (paper).

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Recommended citation:

Freund, B. (2018). Northrup, David. 2017. Seven Myths of Africa in World History. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. 162 pp. ISBN 978-1-62466-640-7 (cloth), 978-1-62466-639-1 (paper). *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 6(1), 147–151. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v6i1.231>



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Northrup, David. 2017. *Seven Myths of Africa in World History*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. 162 pp. ISBN 978-1-62466-640-7 (cloth), 978-1-62466-639-1 (paper).

The remarkable title of this book may well attract buyers but disappoint professional readers, especially those outside the USA. In fact, David Northrup seems largely to target teachers of African history attempting to make their subject interesting by offering a variety of hints of how to proceed in exposing supposedly widespread myths. As such, it is most interesting to those who are curious about what goes on in African studies in the USA.

Two critical moments, closely bounded in time, greatly influenced the development of this field as an academic subject. The first was the tumultuous meeting of the African Studies Association USA in 1969. As a result, those interested in policy issues and policy type work, mostly of course political scientists and generally on the liberal end of an American consensus often with government connections, withdrew very largely from academic African studies, which became dominated by those who took up Africa as a kind of benevolent anti-racist “message” that went counter to commonplace intuitive American thought and attracted particularly historians and anthropologists.

Shortly after, another explosive event Americans associate with “the 60s” occurred as gun-toting black students made a nationalist statement at Cornell University, a prestigious private East Coast institution. One response was to create many small departments of Africana or Pan-African Studies where such activists could operate their own networks and pursue their own ideas without disturbing the life of the university as a whole. It underscored the sense to which the end-product of African studies for many in America is not contemporary Africa (and least of all the political life of contemporary Africa) but the struggles of self-conscious Afro-Americans trying to reach out to a distant past of enslavement and before and find international race-based affinities. Additionally, from the 1980s on, hundreds of American tertiary institutions began to offer African-orientated courses in order to speak to the general run of undergraduates in the name of variety and diversity. These trends are quite unlike the way African studies can be said to have developed in Europe where it remains very much tied

to policy studies, to the world of NGOs as much as governments while a small side-show is orientated to the classic humanities, the study of art and literature etc. In Europe anthropology has some purchase and history very little on the whole.

Northrup comes from the older school of US historians of Africa. He starts by hauling out once again the infamous Hugh Trevor-Roper comment about the unrewarding gyrations of wandering African tribes hardly being history. It is not clear that this means much to young people today. He also uses the philosopher G.F.W. Hegel in this regard without seemingly grasping that Hegel is a much more formidable target than a forgotten Tory establishment figure such as Trevor-Roper with his colonial view of Africa. Hegel knew little of Africa, of course. However, he did begin to crystallise a notion of modernity, of the rise and significance of the West which taken in one direction greatly influenced Marx and Engels. On modernity and on the values of the West, Hegel's influence hardly is confined to the Left and he offers a far more important way of understanding modern history that must continue to challenge serious writers on modern Africa. The issues raised are usually sidestepped by historians of Africa such as Northrup. Northrup's diffuse attempt to give a happy end to African studies, borrowing mainly from the very superficial good economic news caused by the early 21st century mineral boom, will largely convince the already convinced.

In his early chapters, Northrup holds out as models the pioneer US African historians, Chris Ehret of UCLA, where he studied himself, and Philip Curtin of the University of Wisconsin and then Johns Hopkins University. Both of these have certainly written interesting books, in Curtin's case over a very wide field. However, Curtin's Atlantic slave count book, which reduced (generally it is now thought by too much) the overall number of victims of the Atlantic slave trade also appeared, especially in the eyes of thin-skinned black nationalists, to reduce as well the seriousness of what happened by focusing on the bloodless dominance of numbers. The scale, geographic scope and endurance of the trade over centuries are in fact so great as to make it hard for these figures to come alive to a reader. The most interesting thing about them is the breakdown into particular sources, destinations, shifts over time, etc. Perhaps unintentionally, Curtin has indeed inspired too many others who simply want to count and don't try to tackle, as

for instance Walter Rodney once did, the bigger picture of what all this meant to human beings.

Northrup is correctly quite emphatic on the extent to which African societies themselves yielded up the slaves but evidence about slaving raids and the extent to which violence affected African politics and the quality of human existence is too easily reduced to the rise of powerful states as in the work of the Englishman John Fage, another pioneer academic writer in the field. We know in fact still surprisingly little about slaving and its impact in Africa; it is not an easy subject on which to draw “oral traditions” freely imparted. One can use the defensive orientation of various relict populations in West Africa using difficult terrain to protect themselves or the struggles of some people even today to overcome prejudices and discrimination within their own localities to guess at this impact amongst other methods.

Ehret is another story. I call him the historian of the “circas” because his attempt to derive major shifts in early African history (domestication of specific animal species, forging of iron or other metals) from linguistic evidence is not easy to teach and does not convince in terms of dating. Could you teach a history of Europe to non-specialists in which most of the course was situated before the rise of Rome? Linguistics is not a field many historians of Africa or elsewhere understand or can handle critically and it is hard talking effectively to Ehret’s work for most of us.

I have found myself something of a corrective in the bold work of archaeologists of the past couple of decades. These have particularly shed light on material life in what used to be termed the Dark Ages, the first centuries after the decline of Rome. Northrup still thinks the so-called Garamantes of the Libyan Desert are largely known to us from the Greeks and Romans. In fact, we know a lot now thanks to the wonderful digs of David Mattingly, for instance on how the Garamantes developed an irrigation system to create a fairly large agricultural and urbanised society in the midst of the Sahara, even if so far we have not really deciphered their script. Then there is excellent work done at the Axumite port of Adulis in Eritrea, which reveals the trade links between Ethiopia, the Red Sea and India in the late Roman era and after, the excavations at Chibuene in southern Mozambique which hint at how the early gold trade connected to the

Indian Ocean coast through the Zambesi valley, the archaeology of Gao and, of course, the pioneering studies of Djenné in Mali by the McIntoshes. For me at least these are more telling historical sources than the linguistic “circas”; they make the African history of the early Christian millennia start to come alive.

Northrup is bothered by contemporary so-called Afropessimists, who thrive in small black nationalist Africana studies departments of the USA. I think myself that their devotion to myth-making is such that rational refutations of this or that argument about some person being truly black or part of some massively great civilisation is never going to convince true believers, given their intense suspicion of racism. I am not unsympathetic with the frustrations Northrup expresses. For a European, however, this kind of myth-making is very much a side issue so far. It is also much easier to stress cultural issues in promoting a sense of an African contribution to contemporary civilisation, sometimes but not necessarily with race making an appearance. Here there are indeed African global successes of our own era outside the frustrating terrain of political economy and economic history.

Northrup spent his career at a prestigious Catholic university and he is relatively knowledgeable if rather uncritical of Christian, and especially Catholic, influence in modern Africa. He says nothing for instance about the influence of Pentecostalism in Africa as though the big issue was Muslims vs. Christians. He avoids, for instance, the charged question of the role of the Catholic Church in the Rwandan genocide or the tale of the renegade Zambian archbishop Milingo, keen on faith healing and exorcism and later an enemy of priestly celibacy, who had to be defrocked. Of course, thanks to the panic this invokes in the West, we all know that Islam too has changed its character. Salafism and the recovery of what is seen as orthodoxy is a growing phenomenon in many countries. To frame the question of competition between the two faiths Northrup has to go back as a “myth” to the musings of the 19th century West African coastal intellectual Edward Blyden, not exactly a contemporary bestseller. The point isn’t that Islam is more African than Christianity but that both Islam and Christianity are unevenly taking on a more and more African cast over time. So this book is mostly stimulating if one is looking to dissect how American historians have presented the history

of Africa to their students. Its unmasking of “myths” is unlikely to excite European readers with their novelty.

Bill Freund

Thornton, Robert J. 2017. *Healing the Exposed Being: A South African Ngoma Tradition*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 336 pp. ill. ISBN: 978-1-77614-018-3

Robert Thornton is a cultural and medical anthropologist with a long-standing interest in African indigenous knowledge and practices of so-called “traditional healing,” specifically *bungoma*. His current ethnographic research investigates responses to HIV and other health problems in South Africa; it builds on and is a thematic extension of his over sixteen year-long research exploring the lives and practices of local “traditional healers” *sangoma*, spanning the rural chiefdoms, formal town and townships and informal settlements of Mpumalanga province. This nearly two-decade long exploration yielded the present book *Healing the Exposed Being* – a rich ethnographic account of the therapeutic application of *bungoma* healing and philosophy of life carefully embedded in the complexity of the modern-day political, economic and ecological as well as environmental context.

In Thornton’s view, *sangoma* are a kind of anthropologists of the local environment and life ways. Thus, rather than interpreting their knowledge and action as one of the African religions or kinds of healing, such as “Zulu religion,” he presents their practice as an indigenous anthropology and analyses it in a way that a professional anthropologist would interpret the work of his or her colleagues. He presents *bungoma* as an intellectual tradition that has its own set of fundamental concepts that guide its practice. While trying to describe it in its own terms, where needed, Thornton explains it in his own words (while making clear he does so) and highlights particular points he feels are most significant. Thus, he takes on the role of a participant observant of his fellow anthropologists – *sangoma*. Throughout the book, Thornton makes a conscious and deliberate effort to refute the existing and often deeply ingrained misconceptions in both popular and academic literature, public health and medicine,