

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Reid. *The African Revolution. A History of the Long Nineteenth Century*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) [etc.] 2025. xxii, 410 pp. Maps. \$35.00; £30.00. (E-book: \$35.00; £30.00.)

This book is the latest instalment in Richard Reid's two-decade-long project to do justice to the complexities of Africa's "long nineteenth century". Underpinned by serious scholarship, and displaying Reid's trademark power of synthesis and knack for the bigger picture, *The African Revolution* "Africanizes" the partition of the continent, presenting it not so much as an abrupt foreign invasion, but rather as the culmination of long-term, partly endogenous, dynamics of change. In Reid's telling, an African-driven scramble for power and resources was well under way before "The Scramble" at the end of the nineteenth century – and the latter can only be understood in the context of the former. This is history on a grand scale, which, with its (explicit) downplaying of the rupture represented by the European partition of the continent and (more implicit) questioning of the ostensibly transformative effects of colonialism, will prove troubling to some and inspiring to others. One could go so far as to suggest that not since Robinson and Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* (1961) has anything so ambitious and provocative been attempted.

The volume is subdivided into an introductory part and four substantive parts. Chapter Two (one of two chapters that make up Part Two) updates Igor Kopytoff's notion of an internal African frontier to foreground the "instability and creativity" that have historically lain at the heart of Africa's "political culture" (p. 48). Even when set against a backdrop of "continual fission and fusion" (p. 50) – developments that, at least in West and West-Central Africa, were supercharged by the impact of the Atlantic economy from the sixteenth century – the long nineteenth century represented a kind of acceleration, a veritable "age of insurgency" (the title of Chapter Three). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, a "military revolution" unfolded across the continent – from the savannah of western Africa to the lowveld of KwaZulu-Natal, from the interior of present-day Tanzania and the Great Lakes region to the Ethiopian highlands. The outcome of these processes of "political reform and rejuvenation and reconstitution" (p. 59), which were often driven by the encroachment of global commerce and the new opportunities and dangers it presented, was the spread of more centralized, violent, and militarized (if "intrinsically volatile" [p. 100]) forms of governance. It was in the internal and external cleavages to which these "insurgencies" and attempts at reforms had given rise that, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, intruding Europeans inserted themselves, exploiting them for their ends even as they were being co-opted into them.

This theme is systematically pursued in the two chapters comprising Part Four of the volume (Chapter Four, the only chapter included in Part Three, deals mainly with the material, socio-economic, dimension of Africa's nineteenth-century "insurgencies"). Especially in Chapter Six, several insightful examples are mobilized to show that the Scramble is best understood as an exercise in "interstitial imperialism": on the one hand, the "insecurities and instabilities in many African polities" provided "multiple openings to foreign adventurers bent on intrigue" (pp. 207–208); on the other, African "sub-imperialists" and other intermediaries absorbed the Europeans into their own ongoing politico-military projects, harnessing them to advance both tactical and strategic interests. (Reid's profound knowledge of Ugandan history comes in handy here, of course.) Part Five contains one chapter that rounds off the book with an impressive and original discussion of how the turmoil of the nineteenth century affected African ways of reckoning with history. "[N]ewly animated engagements with the past", Reid contends, were put to the service of "novel political and military orders" (p. 275). The paradox is that they took place in precisely the same period in which European interlopers, emboldened by their new racial "sciences", denied the continent any meaningful historicity.

Chief among the volume's attractions is Reid's inspired prose – a fine example of how to combine rigour, subtlety, and pathos, with the latter reaching its peak in the series of narrative "acts" at the start of each part and dedicated to key figures in East African history. The book has some idiosyncrasies, however. Given that the concept of "revolution" is the peg on which everything else hangs, readers might have expected a fuller and more convincing definition than is offered in the first, introductory part of *The African Revolution*. If we are to take it seriously, then the term should aspire to be something more than a synonym for "insurgency and innovation" or "turbulent reformism" (p. 20), or even "creative volatility" (p. 22 *et passim*), lest the idea lose analytical purchase and be applied to pretty much every instance of violent political transformation under the sun. More specifically, since Reid's "revolution"/"insurgency" was largely driven by military developments, it is surprising that the author (who is anything but unfamiliar with European history) did not see fit to engage with the early modern European scholarship within which the notion of "military revolution" first gained currency. This, incidentally, is a criticism that can also be levelled at Reid's previous works, especially *Warfare in African History* (2012), to which *The African Revolution* is indebted. In sum, in this reviewer's opinion, the book required a less impressionistic explanation of its central organizing category.

My other caveat is that some areas are better served than others. While very much at home in western and eastern Africa (as well as the Horn, of course), Reid is on shakier ground in other regions, not least in Central Africa, with whose historiography he is evidently less conversant. To an extent, of course, this is inevitable, and may have something to do with the author's predilection for English-language sources (only a handful of French texts appear in the book's footnotes). But it remains a pity, since much work on, notably, the Congo Basin would have fitted very nicely into Reid's overall interpretation and provided grist for its mill. Nowhere was the colonial "co-option of pre-existing forms of military predation and control" (p. 166) more in evidence than in the Congo Free State, which *The African Revolution* deals with only in passing and not always accurately. (Garenganze, the Yeke polity, did not come to an end with the death of Msiri [p.

88]; there was no Belgian Congo in the 1890s [p. 231]; and it is misleading to speak of a “Belgian Congo Free State” [p. 240].) At a minimum, Reid should have made some use of Jean-Luc Vellut’s pioneering articles; David Gordon’s important recent interventions; Robert Harms’s marvellous *Land of Tears*; and perhaps even the present writer’s analysis of the rise of warlordism in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹

Despite its occasional conceptual vagueness and bibliographical oversights, *The African Revolution* is an arresting and imaginative work – less undergraduate-friendly, perhaps, than many of Reid’s earlier books, but still destined to spark debate among Africanist and imperial historians. Most importantly, it serves as a powerful reminder that much remains to be said about the African nineteenth century and that its study – in Reid’s own words – remains “absolutely fundamental to an understanding of modern Africa” (p. xix).

Giacomo Macola

Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art History, Media and Performing Arts,
“La Sapienza” University of Rome, Rome, Italy
Email: giacomo.macola@uniroma1.it

¹Some of Vellut’s most significant essays are now available in Jean-Luc Vellut, *Congo: Ambitions et désenchantements, 1880–1960* (Paris, 2017). David M. Gordon, “The Abolition of the Slave Trade and the Transformation of the South-Central African Interior during the Nineteenth Century”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 66:4 (2009), pp. 915–938, and “Precursors to Red Rubber: Violence in the Congo Free State, 1885–1895”, *Past & Present*, 236:1 (2017), pp. 133–168; Robert W. Harms, *Land of Tears: The Exploration and Exploitation of Equatorial Africa* (New York, 2019); Giacomo Macola, “Warlordism in the Congo Basin between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 56:1 (2023), pp. 1–19.