

What Went Wrong With Africa: A Contemporary History

A review by Paul T. Miller

Paul T. Miller (ptm@temple.edu) is a doctoral candidate in the African American Studies Department at Temple University. His dissertation on the history of African Americans in San Francisco from 1945-1975, and lives in Oakland, California.

Van Der Veen, Roel. *What Went Wrong With Africa: A Contemporary History*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2002 (Dutch); 2004 (English translation). \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN: 9068325485.

Roel Van Der Veen's *What Went Wrong With Africa* is an impressive effort to explicate the conundrums that have impeded progress in Africa since the end of World War II. Van Der Veen, a former Asian Specialist for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, admits that prior to his 1995 transfer to the Sub-Saharan Africa Department in The Hague, he knew almost nothing about Africa. This book then is the product of seven years of working in that department and his attempt to grapple with issues surrounding African development.

The author opens by indicating that misrule, internal conflict, corruption, AIDS and poverty inhibit development in Africa and that they are primarily an autochthonous problem that would exist even if Africa had not experienced centuries of European domination. In effect, Van Der Veen eschews the impact of enslavement (both Arab and European) and colonialism. Despite claims to the contrary, his approach to examining the concrete conditions of African development problems lack any real historical context. As such, as Tanzanian critic Ombeni Sefue states, *What Went Wrong With Africa* spends most of its time "providing sweeping descriptive analysis that does not go deep enough".

To his credit, some sections of the book hit the mark. One example is how Van Der Veen repeatedly evidences the corruption of African elites, a very real and ongoing problem. He illustrates how powerful networks of political leaders such as Taylor in Liberia, Mobutu in Zaire and Abacha in Nigeria used public money as their own, enriching themselves and their loyal base of cronies while neglecting public institutions such as healthcare and education. In each of these cases the author shows how leaders used national natural resources and foreign aid to exploit "patronage networks" in order to gain and maintain power. Such networks are, as Van Der Veen explains, indigenous to Africa and based on the patron's ability to provide his client base with favors such as contracts or jobs.

He notes “Links between patrons and clients are informal in nature, but because patrons nearly always make use of state power and government resources, their ties with clients often take on a formal character as well. Informal ties and networks are the reality behind otherwise meaningless official titles and hierarchies.” Sadly, this remains as much as a problem today as it was when Ayi Kwei Armah wrote *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

Also well done is the coverage on internal conflicts in Africa. Although Van Der Veen does not delve back further than the 20th century to explain the problems, and in most cases underplays the impact of European colonialism in fomenting ethnic differences, he does describe current conflicts and primary players to an extent that the reader can get an idea of what the problems are, and how difficult they are to resolve. His description of the conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the power struggle in Congo between Kabila and his opponents both in the country and in neighboring countries, the demise of Somalia and the problems in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea allow the reader a thumbnail sketch of the tragedy in these affected areas. Specifically, his treatment of the conflict in Liberia is thorough, and explains the many sided problem to creating peace in Liberia.

One problem that stands out starkly is the chapter on globalization, here the author makes no attempt to critically evaluate what has become known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ as it applies to African development. Liberalization of governmental policy, privatization, increasing corporate control, and structural adjustment programs (SAP) are the characteristics indicative of globalization in Africa. Even by the standards of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), the two largest institutions that implement SAPs in Africa, this style of reform has failed miserably.

Van Der Veen, although accurately describing some the present conditions of African underdevelopment, omits some key factors. For example, he notes that only 10% of trade in Africa is done between African countries because, in part, countries in the same region usually produce the same products. What he fails to indicate is that the European colonial powers forced their African colonies to produce only a handful “cash crops” such as coffee, cocoa, groundnuts or cotton. Upon independence, these same European powers created dependency networks that stifled international African trade so that newly independent countries were forced to export only these primary products to their former colonial masters rather than develop their own diversified economies. Next, SAPs, imposed by the same European countries that ran the IMF and WB, further exacerbated the problem by mandating austerity measures that forced countries to continue down this path throughout the 1980s and 90s in order to secure the funding required to run their economies.

Technically and stylistically, the absence of a subject index makes the book nearly inaccessible for easy reference, one of the author's intended uses for it. Although there is a country index, it only provides a starting point for those who already know something about their subject. In addition, although Van Der Veen makes liberal use of World Bank publications, he fails to include the research of many researchers who are widely acknowledged as indispensable in the field. For example, Van Der Veen shows his inexperience by writing a book on Africa without a single reference to the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop. Also problematic is his omissions of other leading scholars and leaders including: Esedebe in the section on Pan-Africanism, Gourevitch in the section on the Rwandan genocide and the primary texts of many African leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere or even Kwame Nkrumah.

Roel Van Der Veen's *What Went Wrong With Africa* shines light on a few areas that are problematic for African development such as internal conflicts and patronage networks. However, far too often this book sounds like an apology for European colonialism. Indeed statements in the conclusion such as, "At the start of the twenty-first century we must conclude that, despite the lasting importance of the international environment, external factors cannot have been the overriding cause" of Africa's failures, and "Colonialism left many scars in Africa, but it did not make the continent poorer", leave the reader wondering what exactly the author learned while working in the Dutch Sub-Saharan Africa Department. He in fact blames Africa and "Africanization" of modern forms of government and economy for Africa's problems. Although a sincere effort to explain the situation he found himself as a policy official in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even with technical revision *What Went Wrong With Africa* lacks enough historical depth to be of much use by serious scholars of African history or development.

References

Amin, Samir. *Obsolescent Capitalism*. London: Zed Books, 2004.

Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann, 1968

Diop, Cheikh Anta. *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987.

Huffman, Alan. *Mississippi In Africa*. New York: Gotham Books, 2005.

Khapoya, Vincent. *The African Experience*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1997.

Sefue, Ombeni. "What Went Wrong in Africa? It Is Partly in the Manner of its Birth and Upbringing." *DevIssues*, v. 5, no. 3. April 2004. posted on the web at:
http://adlib.iss.nl/php_root/phpBB2/posting.php?mode=topicreview&t=18&

World Bank. *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2000.