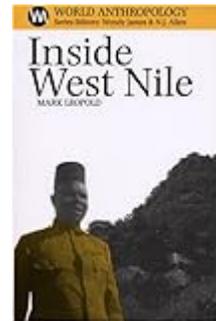




Mark Leopold. *Inside West Nile: Violence, History and Representation on an African Frontier.* Oxford: James Currey, 2005. x + 180 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-85255-940-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-930618-64-0; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-930618-65-7.



Reviewed by Wendy C. Hamblet (Department of University Studies, North Carolina A and T State University)

Published on H-Africa (October, 2007)

Anthropological History: Innovative Method Defeats History's Explanatory Power

Like many scholars who study violence and its effects, Mark Leopold is convinced that histories of violence propel people into future violence. He also suspects, as do many violence scholars, that historical analyses of victimized peoples often end up blaming the victims for the abuse they have historically suffered (often based on the argument that the cause of the repression resides in the people's inherently violent nature, necessitating external control). Postcolonial Western accounts of newly independent African nations tend to follow this pattern, justifying historical repression, territorial and economic seizure of African lands, and the slaughter and enslavement of African peoples as necessary controls over "savage primitives." The myth of a dark, deadly, and impenetrable land overrun by disease-ridden, bloodthirsty natives served all those who profited from colonial repression—colonial elites, evangelists on missions to "civilize" the pagan "primitives," or "Jungle Doctor" explorers seeking to embellish their reputations as bold adventurers.

Leopold attempts to undercut the tendency of historical analyses to create blameworthy victims by rewrit-

ing the history of the West Nile "anthropologically." The narrative structure of a chronological account, argues Leopold, always has an agenda. Narratives tend to highlight the events that serve the governing agenda and omit or downplay those facts or events that contradict the writer's goal. Since the writers almost always represent the powerful, history's victims are portrayed as culpable for their own abuse. By applying the "anthropological" descriptor to his historical analysis, Leopold is signifying that he models his methodological approach upon the methods practiced within the discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists attempt to enter a foreign culture without prejudice, in order to experience *from the inside* the people's customs and traditions, and then they extrapolate *backwards* from current practices to the historical conditions which likely gave rise to those practices. Thus does Leopold write his history of the West Nile by moving backwards through time. This method, he hopes, will disrupt narrative coherence and undermine the causal connections narrative accounts imply (p. 7).

Leopold thus begins his anthropological history of the West Nile by describing how the land and its peo-

ples appear to outsiders and to themselves today. The inhabitants of this area appear to all onlookers as a people cursed and steeped in evil. The district suffers generally from a negative image, explains Leopold, as a “marginal place populated by inherently violent people” (p. 3). History, read through the present negative realities, would surely imply that the inhabitants of this area are the source of their own marginality and misfortune. However, as Leopold unfolds backwards the difficult story of the trials and struggles of the West Nile, the reader comes to see how today’s realities have their roots not in the moral failings of a corrupt people, but in the fragility of life in a borderland constantly under political and social reconstruction. The people of the West Nile have suffered across the violent chapters of a peculiarly challenging history.

The effect of the new methodology is stunning. We see that postcolonial tyrants, such as the district’s most notorious son, General Idi Amin Dada, were able to seize national power as liberating heroes because almost a century of European colonial rule had prepared the people for passive submission. Belgian and British rulers were harsh taskmasters, imposing a rigorous migrant labor system that disrupted tribal loyalties and family structure and herded people into close, unhealthy conditions that favored epidemic outbreaks of disease. The Europeans were not the first nor the cruelest of the indigenous people’s persecutors; the colonials were predated by brutal Arab slave raiders during the Ottoman Empire’s expansion into northern Africa.

Leopold’s *Inside the West Nile* is a fascinating anthropological journey into the peculiar realities of everyday life in a war-torn “frontier zone.” The waves of sufferings endured by the indigenous folk, when turned from back to front, are experienced by the reader as discrete, barely connected existential moments of subjective reconstruction in a people’s shifting identity. Ultimately, however, a performative contradiction haunts Leopold’s project. By interrupting the historical flow and unseating

the causal connections of historical narrative, the book gives the reader the false impression that events are disconnected, that people, though affected by the events around them, are free at any moment to make radically different choices about who they are and how they will respond to their circumstances.

However, scholars who study the profound and circuitous workings of violence upon victims generally agree upon several points: people are never subjectively free but are always to a large degree prisoners of their historical circumstances, their worldview distorted by present historico-political realities and the truths dictated by the powerful; violence begets violence; today’s victims become tomorrow’s perpetrators. Violence reconstructs subjectivities, indelibly marking their characters and the character of the society in general, teaching victims that the world is a threatening place where one is better off armed and aggressive than submissive and powerless.

The West Nile is, and has been, a borderland of radical violence since the first Arab slavers arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. The area and its unfortunate inhabitants have been constant victims of history, prey for profiteering adventurers, and targets of cut-throat colonial expansionists. The indigenous people have been systematically dehumanized by one hundred and fifty years of oppression, slavery, migrant labor camps, and forced conscription into slaughter-missions against their neighbors. Idi Amin Dada is as much a child of that history as are the mass poverty and displacement, the insecurity, fear and suspicion, and, yes, the violent dispositions that characterize the brutalized populations of the region today. Leopold’s disruption of the narrative presents historical moments as discrete and freed from the weight of the past, but I am not convinced that this style of presentation does justice to the victim populations who continue in their daily realities to bear the weight of their cruel histories.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Wendy C. Hamblet. Review of Leopold, Mark, *Inside West Nile: Violence, History and Representation on an African Frontier*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13679>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.