

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Kevin Shillington.** *Causes and Consequences of Independence in Africa.* Austin, Texas: Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 1998. 80 pp. \$27.11 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8172-4060-8.



**Reviewed by** John Pape (scholar)

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Kevin Shillington is a familiar name to anyone who has taught high school history in an Anglophone African country. For resource-starved teachers Shillington's books provided at least enough factual fodder to get students through exams. Given the necessity of putting meat on the bones of an external syllabus, many of us were willing to forgive Shillington's plodding style and failure to engage his readers.

But *Causes and Consequences* is a book with a different purpose. The intention is to provide youth in the U.K. with material that will provoke an interest in Africa. My assumption was that such an opportunity would have provided Shillington with the space to go beyond the confines of the recitation requirements for Cambridge's A-levels and the deeds of great men. Sadly, Shillington fails to extend himself beyond his previous works. Were this book written in the glory days of African nationalism in the 1960s, perhaps it could have made a contribution to deconstructing colonial historiography. But as we approach the new millennium, Shillington remains mired in the past.

According to his own intentions, Shillington wants to present a broad picture of Africa which goes beyond the "most common view that Africa is a land full of wild animals in game parks with Africans playing merely a background role as gamekeepers or poachers (p. 6)." Shillington tries to emphasize that Africa is a rich and diverse continent and that there is need for a 'true' picture to be painted in an introductory book like *Causes and Consequences*. To his credit, Shillington does touch on a wide range of topics from the pyramids to colonialism to the

fall of apartheid in South Africa. With an accessible design and lots of attractive photographs, the book has the infrastructure to be an effective introduction to the study of Africa.

However, the actual content of the chapters brings us most of the features of a history that has sent students running from the subject in droves. Firstly, Shillington commits the fatal error for any history educator 'privileging' his own voice. When discussing topics ranging from the rise of forced labour to the struggle for independence, to the nature of post-colonial leaders, the author poses no debates. We are simply subjected to a series of Shillington's assessments. These do little to stimulate interest in Africa or in the nature of historical study.

Moreover, Shillington often uses his own voice to represent the opinions and feelings of all Africans. For example, on page 18 he informs us that "Africans learned an important lesson from the scramble for Africa.... They quickly realized that the way to catch up on this technological deficiency was by means of European systems of education." Surely a more appropriate method of expressing such ideas would have been to use source material, which on a topic such as this is readily available.

Perhaps the excessive use of his personal views would be bearable if he were bringing original sources or new perspectives. But Shillington stands firmly in the Great Man School of history. Untouched by moves toward popular voice or gender analysis, Shillington's players here are almost exclusively male political leaders—even the great trade unionists, religious leaders and entrepreneurs are marginalized. For Shillington, history is made in po-

litical parties, most notably in the negotiating processes where patriarchs sign important documents.

These major historiographical shortcomings are aggravated by a narrative which is rather sloppily constructed. Time frames are often not clear, key dates are frequently omitted some are even inaccurate (such as the date for the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley cited as 1870, p. 9). In this respect Shillington's work seems to contain some of the flaws of many materials quickly cut and pasted together by authors facing impossible deadlines.

Lastly, there are a number of inexplicable omissions. For example, it is difficult to see how someone can write a history of Africa in 1998 and not even mention HIV/AIDS. But perhaps a greater lapse in a book claiming to dispel stereotypes is the relegation of African development success to an afterthought. Shillington deluges us with repeated incidences of ethnic conflict and tales

of Amin et al. before a brief mention of the expansion of education and health services post-independence. He utterly fails to portray development as a tension-ridden process where a variety of forces, including African governments and social movements, former colonial powers, the TNCs, and the international financial institutions battle for hegemony at the national and continental level.

Of course in a 76 page book aimed at junior secondary school students, there is a limit to the breadth of topics and the depth of debate that can be tackled. But a number of history textbook writers, including many within Africa, have succeeded well beyond Shillington in presenting accessible history via a problematizing and interactive methodology.

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