

Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon. *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History (New Approaches to African History)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 333 pp., 13 figures, 4 tables, 4 maps, 29 boxes, notes, Bibliography, index. \$31.99 Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-107-50322-9.

The story of Africa and Africans can only be told by examining the underpinnings of development, power, and knowledge creation. Whether it includes reducing poverty, developing infrastructure, providing clean water and electricity, expanding education, developing employment opportunities, or improving health conditions, the main goal of African governments has been development (13). The stories of Africans reflect the impacts of colonialism that plagued the continent, causing financial, economic, social, and political hardships that marginalized African countries compared to other countries.

Enter Corrie Decker's and Elisabeth McMahon's *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History (New Approaches to African History)*. This well-written work depicts the challenges and problems of development used in Africa throughout its history. Using maps, comparative data, and imagery, the authors describe "an overview that explores where this idea of development came from and how it shaped Africa's past, present and future" (2). Decker and McMahon purport to demonstrate a vision known as development episteme, which refers to this idea of a "knowledge system that has shaped ideas of development for Africa over the past two centuries" (2). More specifically, by employing this concept of development episteme, the authors claim that there are "measurable differences in "development" between nations, societies, or social groups" (3).

Both Corrie Decker of the University of California, Davis, and Elisabeth McMahon of Tulane University are historians whose work centers primarily on African studies, emphasizing gender, childhood, and development of African communities. Over the years, both professors have attempted to understand how Africa's position in global affairs and development concerns are discussed, depicted, interrogated, and analyzed in newspapers, articles, educational statistics; health records and interviews with African government officials.

In *The Idea of Development in Africa*, Decker and McMahon examine how colonial influences and independence challenges shine a light on the dynamics of shaping Africa's development while

eradicating poverty, generating growth, and facilitating global trade. (16). Throughout the text, both authors hold “Development” as a critical idea to better understand Africa’s concerns through the lens of past empires and colonialism and the long-term impacts of these systems of governance on Africa’s growth today. By navigating historical, political, economic, and social landscapes, the authors can contextualize African Americans' experiences and challenges and triumphs during their path forward through “Development.”

In the introduction, Decker and McMahon precut their arguments and review the book’s organization. Each chapter of the book is separated into three specific parts, examine the “Development Episteme.” As the work progresses through these three parts, the authors employ the concept of “Development Episteme,” which refers to how we perceive and understand the development of an area through the examination of policies, values, and national priorities (15). Using the chapter broken down into parts, Decker and McMahon assemble what a step-by-step ladder is when examining the concept of development in Africa. The authors address the idea of not only development but also the importance of knowledge on development, the implementation of development policies and ideas, and the problems that might be faced or have been faced throughout Africa. Most importantly, by incorporating this organization of writing, newspaper data, interview information, and statistics, the authors demonstrate how development is a multifaceted concept beyond economic growth, including a society's economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions.

Part I, "Origins of the Development Episteme," focuses on providing the readers with knowledge on the Development Episteme and the issues with racism, decolonizing ideas of development, and the steps toward being developed. Decker and McMahon note that "as long as development remains an industry whose power base remains in the global north, efforts to colonize development will fail to restructure the development episteme" (100). Though intertwined with the developed world, Africa's efforts were to build a national identity, establish government systems, and foster economic development. The authors’ examination of the connections between Africa and the developed world demonstrates a false dichotomy of the developed world, which labels Africa as made up of developing nations based on colonial stereotypes, which fuels Africa's developmental drive (99).

Part II, “Implementations of the Development Episteme,” introduces readers to the post-independence era of Africa and the challenges of establishing government structures while promoting economic growth in an area looking to achieve development. Here, Decker and McMahon draw attention to the influence nationalism, socialism, and capitalism have on the organization and

development of policies and structures in Africa (123-124). The authors imply that Africa was to develop the nation while enhancing the human rights of African men and women (174).

Part III, “Problems” in the Development Episteme,” addresses the persistence of poverty, inequality, and social injustice during African development interventions (187). At this point, Decker and McMahon demonstrate how the importance of local agency, cultural values, environmental prosperity, and the incorporation of alternative perspectives redefine the concept of development for the future of Africa for the better. Overall, the authors provide insight into the multifaceted challenges facing Africa and the development landscape while underscoring the need for an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable approach to development.

The Epilogue, entitled “African Critiques of the Development Episteme,” reminds the readers that this book has “demonstrated how development ideas and practices in Africa arose directly out of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism” (275). Overall, their study discusses how examining the progress and development in modern Africa can aid in understanding development in Africa’s future (275).

This book's major strength lies in Decker and McMahon’s ability to connect political rhetoric with the discrimination and development of Africa. Their work provides an insightful read into the developmental challenges of finding a stable economic, political, and social representation of Africa post colonialism. If *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History*, had any weakness, it is that it leaves the reviewer wondering what the viable alternative paths of life for Africans are, given colonialism reshaped their lives.

Decker and McMahon’s work constitutes a smooth, easy-to-read study that would appeal to a broad audience. Historians of Colonialism and Africa’s Development studies would benefit from the details surrounding Africa’s development. This process shows that development produces power and knowledge in Africa’s social, economic, political, and environmental systems. Moreover, Decker and McMahon’s volume opens the doors for future historians to address the correlation more thoroughly between the development of Africa and colonialism and how colonialism is losing its relevance in our current world.

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