

Book Reviews

Van Reybrouck, David, *Congo — The Epic History of a People*, translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett. London: Fourth Estate 2014, 639pp.

Belgian author David van Reybrouck's history of the Congolese people is epic and heroic indeed. It is not the history of a country but of a people and therefore, people's voices take the lead all through the narrative. Many books have been written about Congo but only a few have been as comprehensive and human as this epic history. Through 639 pages of solid information and abundant research, divided into an introduction and fifteen chapters, rounded off with an extensive presentation of the different sources per chapter, this book takes the reader through Congo's history from pre-colonial times to the present day. Van Reybrouck writes in a very pleasant and compelling narrative style, contextualising facts and figures with the stories as they are told by the Congolese, ordinary people, rebel leaders and child soldiers alike, young and old, some of them so old that they have lived through most of the drama discussed in the book. Van Reybrouck has travelled extensively through Africa and has worked regularly with playwrights in Kinshasa and Goma.

It is precisely his narrative style which sets Van Reybrouck's history apart because it makes the reader aware of the human face behind historic events. He makes history more accessible, vibrant and personable. One must admit, *Congo — The Epic History of a People* is indeed another history of Africa told by a European. It is, however, different from other history books in that it has been written from an African perspective with ordinary Congolese in the driving seat. This book offers a comprehensive picture of Congolese history and should, therefore, be read as a complement to more political and academic analyses.

One is struck by the sheer gravity of Congolese history and one wonders how a people can survive, often in one single lifetime, the humiliation of colonialism, a failed independence, dictatorship, economic collapse, an African war, endless civil war, blood diamonds, massacres, the rape of women and children, child soldiers and so on. Name a horror story and Congo has lived it or is still living it, while at the same time being one of the richest countries in the world, with the potential to guarantee food security, natural resources and clean energy for the whole Africa.

One tends to forget, however (and this emerges here and there in the book) that despite the destabilising effects of colonialism, Congo managed during the colonial period and after independence to develop its own cultural brand when Kinshasa, the former Leopoldville, became a trend-setter in Africa for vibrant music, fashion flair and urban 'cool'. Deep into the decaying Mobutu era, and to a certain extent even now, the 'cité' in Kinshasa still had it.

The Congolese themselves put it so well when they jokingly refer to an imaginary article 15 in the Constitution which would read: just cope — *débrouillez-vous*.

Congo — The Epic History of a People takes the reader through the major periods in Congolese history, from before the 1884-1885 Conference of Berlin up to the civil war in Eastern Congo at the beginning of the 21st century from the early European and Arab traders in ivory, slaves and rubber to the arrival of the Chinese in trade and infrastructure projects in recent times. Contrary to other books on the subject, Van Reybrouck goes one step further and follows the Congolese to China where they set up their own businesses to trade with the home country.

The added value of Van Reybrouck's book is that he does not make an issue out of a few events such as the excesses of Leopold II's Congo Free State — irrespective of how ghastly and excessive that period may have been — or the assassination of Patrice Lumumba — widely written about as a world changing event in Congolese history. He tries to place everything into context, with subtlety and in a balanced manner. It is in that way that the reader learns about the early traders from Europe and from the East, about the difference between Leopold's Congo Free State with its crushing rubber regime and the Chinese-built railway and the relative calm of the colonial period which started in 1908 and which would last 50 years. S/he learns about Congo during the First and Second World Wars and about economic and social development turning Congo into the second economy in Africa on the eve of independence in 1960. The reader learns about the political turmoil after independence, the secession attempts of Katanga, the United Nations (UN) involvement and the death of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in a plane crash, the Simba revolt, Congo as an object of the Cold War, the disastrous Mobutu years, the epic march of Laurent-Desire Kabila towards Kinshasa, Africa's first World War, the underlying reasons for ethnic conflict in Eastern Congo, the sensitive relations with Congo's eastern neighbors etc. The reader, however, also learns of the economically and socially destabilising effects of colonisation, the uprooting of traditional power, the

elimination of traditional ways of life and the humiliation of paternalism.

Most of these events are well known to the politically-informed reader. It is, however, refreshing to see them all together in one comprehensive presentation, based on facts and figures and illustrated by people who lived through them. On some issues, the book offers additional and very helpful insights, not only in the text itself but also through the sources listed for complementary reading. These issues include the political rejection of Leopold during his lifetime, the economic development of Congo during the period between the two World Wars, the changed international political situation after the Second World War and the end of colonialism — especially poignant in the Belgian case because of the particular importance of Congo during the Cold War — the lack of advanced education as a reason for failed independence, the history of ethnic tension in Eastern Congo caused by migration as far back as the 19th century and massive import of labor under colonial rule.

Many questions remain, however. The book ends with a government in Kinshasa still unable to establish authority throughout the territory. Will calm return? Can Congo survive as it is? Can the entire Great Lakes Region continue in the present format? Other questions also remain open: was lack of education really the reason for failed independence in 1960 — at a time when tertiary education was not widespread, not even in Europe — and why would the Chinese approach to cooperation in mining and infrastructure be better in the long run than the European development projects in education and health, as examples?

The value of this book lies precisely in raising these questions. Irrespective of its narrative style, the deep human approach in *Congo — The Epic History of a People* makes the reader think.

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Alden, Chris/Chichava, Sérgio (eds), *China and Mozambique: From Comrades to Capitalists*. Johannesburg: Fanele, 2014, 220pp.

Alden and Chichava put together a team of multidisciplinary, multilingual and talented scholars who used multiple sources and methods to discuss