

The African AIDS Epidemic: A History. By John Iliffe. Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey; Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006. Pp. ix, 214; 4 maps. \$55.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

John Iliffe's most recent book is a slim volume on a broad topic. *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History*, tackles a daunting theoretical question: how can history help us better understand the AIDS epidemic? Iliffe provides a practical answer, combining a senior scholar's deep understanding of the continent with a historian's reverence for sources and a conscientious journalist's attention to clear, crisp writing to produce an excellent introductory text that deserves wide readership.

This book is not about new research. Rather, it is a synthesis of existing information that presents the epidemic in the longer context of African history. The book's starting point is President Mbeki's provocative question: why has Africa suffered the worst AIDS epidemic? In order to provide a context for that answer, Iliffe lays out a detailed history of the epidemic. He argues that the nature of the virus, the historical sequence of expansion, and local circumstances all help explain the devastation particular to Africa. In short, "Africa had the worst epidemic because it had the first epidemic" (p. 1).

In fourteen brief chapters Iliffe covers all the big questions about AIDS in Africa. Separate chapters provide information on the origins and the spread of the epidemic from the Equatorial region to the East, South, and West. Iliffe gives an excellent synthesis about causation and describes responses to the epidemic from "above," "below," and by NGOs. He discusses death, how the epidemic has matured, strategies for containment, and then concludes—remarkably—in two taut pages.

The book is methodical, and that is not meant to be a euphemism for "boring." Reading the book is like following a well-marked path: the trail does not require too much effort by readers, yet it provides good overviews of the major topics. Iliffe's organization is logical; for each subject, he begins with a review of the relevant literature (in English and French), highlights disagreements, explains conclusions, and then gives his discrete opinions. This approach is much enhanced by a willingness to admit when data are scarce. Referring to one disputed topic, Iliffe wryly states it is "a subject with few hard data and much exaggeration" (p. 117). Such candor and clarity are refreshing, especially since there is no shying away from controversial questions. The origins of AIDS, African sexual behavior, and the roles of prostitutes and colonialism are all addressed.

Although the topic is dark, Iliffe maintains a note of hope throughout the book. By including quotes from Africans, he makes it clear that while the epidemic is devastating, it is not all encompassing. He also recognizes positive developments: the role of "ordinary people" in minimizing risk of infection, the discovery of antiretroviral drugs, increased international funding, and the activism of HIV positive people. Iliffe goes so far as to predict that the AIDS epidemic, "often seen as a metaphor for Africa's failure to achieve modernity, might instead

be the vehicle by which medical modernity became predominant within the continent" (p. 157).

Obviously, such a concise book cannot cover all areas of such an expansive topic. With that said, I—selfishly—would have liked to see Iliffe discuss some of the ethical questions raised by the epidemic. There was little mention of the ethical debates surrounding mandatory HIV testing, drug trials, confidentiality, and the role of pharmaceutical companies.

Some academics may claim that such a linear narrative cannot convey the chaos of the epidemic and some doctors will complain that there is not enough science in this book. To call these things shortcomings would be a misnomer. I see them as pragmatic decisions and omissions that allow the book to be what it is: an excellent introduction and overview. By not going into overwhelming depth on the medical side, there is room to explore the cultural, historical, and economic factors affecting the epidemic.

I hope this book will become a staple in schools of public health, business, and medicine in addition to being read by undergraduates and non-academics. *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History* is a well-crafted and carefully researched book. It is impressive that more than twenty-five years of AIDS history in Africa has been condensed into 160 extremely readable pages.

MELISSA GRABOYES

Boston University

Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000. By James McCann. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii, 289. \$27.95.

One of the remarkable developments in Africa's agricultural geography since the early twentieth century is the growing dominance of maize in farmers' fields. Agricultural data from mid-century show that maize was commonly sown in association with millet, sorghum, rice, and peanuts in the forest and savanna regions of Africa. By the end of the twentieth century, maize increasingly appeared as a staple cereal in monocropped fields. This relatively recent and significant transformation of Africa's agrarian landscapes is the subject of Jim McCann's book on the continent's encounter with maize. It is a story that unfolds from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. The book's goal is to explain why and how maize has achieved this prominence in African farmers' fields and diets. Jim McCann, an Africanist historian known for his scholarship on the agricultural and environmental history of Ethiopia, broadens his focus to the continental and global scales to show how the expansion of maize is tied to political-ecological dynamics that have shaped and been shaped by this versatile crop. What does his history of maize in Africa tell us?



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