

AFRICA AS A LIVING LABORATORY: EMPIRE, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE PROBLEM OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, 1870-1950. By Helen Tilley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 496; Maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.00 paper.

In all ways, Helen Tilley's new book is distinguished by its elegance. The University of Chicago press has published a beautiful book full of color maps, high quality images, more charts than you'd want, and it is packaged with a strikingly modern cover. The elegant aesthetics are coupled with a sophisticated argument, which results in a valuable piece of scholarship likely to be used by graduate students and academics interested in history, anthropology and science in Africa. A word of warning, though: this is a book best read in the morning, with at least one cup of coffee finished, and a notepad nearby. Tilley has written a book that requires much of its readers, but has much to give in return.

Simply put, *Africa as a Living Laboratory* argues that a few decades' worth of Africanist scholarship has misinterpreted colonial scientists and their work on topics as diverse as agriculture, the environment, medicine, racial science, and anthropology. Tilley claims the book "points to the colonial origins of a range of critiques that scholars in African studies have long suggested are products of postcolonial thinking (329)." Drawing on the personal writings and scientific reports of the scientists, Tilley argues that these colonial employees embraced African knowledge (which she calls "vernacular science") and integrated African practices into their own work. These scientists also grappled with the concepts of complexity and interdependence and emphasized the importance of localizing knowledge. These surprising sensitivities led them to produce new knowledge calling into question the tenets of colonialism, leading to "epistemic decolonization" and ultimately "destabiliz[ing] the foundations of imperial rule (322, 320)."

These are big arguments, and unlikely to be satisfyingly to all. Yet Tilley is diligent in supporting these big claims, and honest enough to recognize that even with 350 pages of dense text, she may not have provided all the answers. In the conclusion she admits to being more interested in stimulating further debate about "the extent to which scientific knowledge and its production played a role not just in the *construction* of empires but also in their *dismantling* (323)."

In many ways, the manner in which Tilley concludes the book and addresses her imagined critics is a demonstration of the book's characteristic elegance. Many Africanist historians and anthropologists are likely to be disappointed since the book's focus is not on Africans, but on research campaigns that took place in Africa. Furthermore, Tilley is not writing about how projects actually occurred, but the development of *ideas* about those projects. A focus on projects rather than people, and ideas rather than outcomes is frustrating. However, Tilley is clear that her intention was to grapple with the big questions related to the development of scientific knowledge rather than get mired in details.

The irony is that details are what overwhelm the book in places. While discussing the African Survey (one of her key examples), details about meetings and negotiations overwhelm the significance of the actual Survey. Tilley is clearly taken with her subject matter, and her enthusiasm is usually infectious. But parts of a few chapters read like a

history of meetings, conferences, lunches, memos and discussions taking place in London, Oxford and Cambridge—it can be hard to remember the book is about Africa.

The book is structured around eight chapters outlining six different African laboratories: the Living Laboratory, the Imperial Laboratory, A Development Laboratory, an Environmental Laboratory, A Racial Laboratory and an Anthropology Laboratory. Chapter 1 introduces us to the significance of the African Survey and to the concept of “Africa as a Living Laboratory.” Chapters 2 through 6 address the laboratories mentioned above; chapter 7 concludes by discussing the (unfortunately termed) concept of “Epistemic Pluralism.” Readers would be best served by reading the Conclusion first and then the body chapters. The 150 pages of appendices, notes and bibliography signal Tilley’s meticulousness as a researcher.

My sense is that those who dislike Tilley’s book will not disagree with her conclusions as much as her focus. Throughout I found myself wanting to hear more about how high rhetoric translated into actual practice, and to hear about more than a single African research assistant. Yet as Tilley points out, these are somewhat unfair criticisms. Her intention was to write a history of ideas, not of practices; and that she has done very well.

--Melissa Graboyes
University of Oregon