

## Review

Andreas Mehler, Henning Melber, Klaas van Walraven (eds) (2005) *Africa Yearbook 2004: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

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In the preface of the 1969 Penguin edition of the *African Handbook* [1961], editor Colin Legum remarked on the 'obvious need' for a reference text on Africa which could be 'easily handled and easily read' and would 'get experts to write for non-experts.' There was, he said, an

increasing demand for reliable background information from politicians and diplomats interested in the affairs of the new 'crisis continent'; from well-informed readers who find they need more than they can get from their newspapers or weekend reviews; from businessmen and tourists discovering the growth opportunities presented by the newly-independent countries; and, of course, from Africans themselves who, at long last, are beginning to discover their own continent. (Legum 1969: 11)

Legum wrote when decolonising Africa was emerging as the focus for seeming extremes of analytical optimism and pessimism: new opportunities, new crises, a pan-Africanist consciousness fuelling new discoveries of the continent, the concept of an African Renaissance. It is notable, 40 years later, that Legum's preface should ring as thematically relevant, his portrait of a readership motivated by such familiar concerns and hopes. Certainly, the need for reliable information about Africa is one element of continuity among many. However, it is not only the continuities, but also the significant and often rapid changes on the continent and in the globalised world, that provide a useful starting point for introducing a somewhat different reference text, a yearbook rather than a handbook, but one which is similarly written

by academic researchers for a wider readership and which is certainly also 'easily handled and easily read'.

*Africa Yearbook 2004* is the first excellent submission of what is intended to be an annual series. It represents a joint undertaking by three of Europe's most important research institutes for African studies: the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, and the Institute of African Affairs in Hamburg. The editors are directors and researchers at the respective centres, and are prominent regional specialists. The *Yearbook* benefits from their cooperative effort. While its precedents may be found in the *Afrika Jahrbuch*, which ran for 17 years, the production of a new yearbook with a wider international appeal was encouraged by the Africa-Europe group for Interdisciplinary Studies, a network of European academics working on Africa. As such, an impressive range of scholarly expertise has been brought together to produce a volume that is 'primarily concerned with providing factual (though not necessarily neutral) information' related to one calendar year.

The 500-page text is organised to offer the reader both detail and breadth, and this is achieved by providing several 'levels' or points of entry from which a reader may choose. Two brief but informative essays in the opening pages of the book offer an overview of continental developments and of issues affecting Africa's global relationships during 2004. The first essay assesses the significant processes and events that affected Sub-Saharan Africa during the year: new conditions and policy decisions within the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); developments related to the World Bank, the G8, and the United Nations; a continental portrait of peace and war, democracy and elections, implications of the US 'war on terror', and HIV/AIDS. The second essay discusses political and economic relationships between Africa-Europe, and the diplomatic outcomes of key meetings and organisational summits, and the roles of African and European heads of state.

These introductory essays contextualize the main body of the *Yearbook*, which presents a collection of reports covering the year's events in each of the 48 individual nation-states that make up sub-Saharan Africa, arranged by region – West, Central, East, and Southern Africa. The national reports are focussed, detailed, and scholarly. While the content indeed privileges the 'factual', it is analytically framed: historical and social context is integrated into a discussion of current events (though readers seeking more explicit historical overviews should read the *Yearbook* alongside other

sources). Authors have worked within a common template under the topical subheadings of 1) domestic politics, 2) foreign affairs, and 3) socioeconomic developments. Each report is about 6-8 pages and in this space accounts for significant legislative developments, local and national election results, the work of key political actors, an assessment of ongoing conflicts or peace processes, economic trends, human rights and public health issues. Respective nations are indicated on a continental map at the start of each essay. Importantly, in contrast to reference works which seek to project an objective tone through textual anonymity, the authors of these essays are named, placing their work within a broader (and searchable) field of scholarship.

The *Yearbook* also contains regional overview essays. Each of the four main sections are introduced through a summary of cross-border social and organisational developments for 2004. These essays place specific national concerns within their sub-regional context, but they also guide readers who are interested in particular themes (democracy, religious conflict, economic growth) towards the relevant and more detailed accounts of nation-states within a region. Much of what is reported here invites deep concern, with pages that are brimful of crisis indicators (dramatic drops in life expectancy rates, for example, around Southern Africa; violent religious clashes in Nigeria; the continued abstinence of NEPAD to critically address problems in Zimbabwe; killings in Darfur). Yet there are positive assessments to be found as well (socioeconomic progress in Southern Africa; stabilizing effects of elections of two West African nations, Ghana and Niger; a dramatic 48 out of 106 Rwandan mayors fired for inefficiency and corruption). It is obviously not in the nature of a yearbook to provide deep or theory-driven explanations for the events reported, and the responsibility of placing these events into a critical social framework rests with readers.

In all essays, the authors have highlighted keywords, phrases, names and themes in bold, a feature that enhances the accessibility of information by allowing the eye to run over a page in search of specific topics. Additionally, a useful table appears on the first few pages of the book with a selection of national data including population, territory in square kilometres, name of currency, HDI statistics, and current head of state.

*Africa Yearbook 2004* signals the arrival of an English language resource that will unquestionably prove useful to researchers, journalists, scholars, students, teachers, NGOs, politicians and diplomats, as well as businesspeople. In their preface, Mehlor, Melber and Van Walraven

promise that *each subsequent edition will provide a completely fresh account*. Libraries and archives should be encouraged to order this handsomely crafted, easily handled and easily read book, and make space for future volumes.

## **References**

Legum, Colin (ed) (1969) *Africa Handbook*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.