

Book Review: Mfum-Mensah, Obed. Colonial Interventions and Destabilization of African Identities. New York: Berghahn Books, 2025. 1+428. Hardcover \$120.00

The vision of Africa as a ‘dark continent,’ full of starving children, ethnic violence, and corrupt dictators is one that is hard to shake in the larger Anglophone world. Politicians, students, and the public imagine a place devoid of culture or even happiness; a place where suffering is endemic and eternal. Obed Mfum-Mensah’s *Colonial Interventions and Destabilization of African Identities* argues that colonialism and trusteeship are to blame. The force of imperialism, first brought by Arab traders, but perpetuated by European political actors and Chinese economic advisors, led to a system of ‘organized infantilization’ on African people. These experiences provided the blueprint used by African leaders to perpetuate the same corrupt practices on their own people.

Essentially Mfum-Mensah looks at Sub-Saharan Africa and asks the question—why are things so bad? His answer is quite simply the foreign interventions Africans suffered destroyed their sense of *ubuntu*, or community. Each of the imperial forces that arrived in the continent argued that African peoples were children in need of the protection that only the mature and civilized nation could provide. When those imperial forces left, the ideas they inculcated in African societies remained. Politicians, judges, and religious leaders each picked up the baton and carried on the harmful practices they had learned at the knees of Arab or European merchants and colonial agents. Mfum-Mensah begins with the religious and economic destabilizations brought by Islamic traders to east and west Africa but quickly moves on to the heart of this work—European colonialism. He also examines post-independence countries, as well as more recent interventions by Chinese government actors in various African countries. Ultimately Mfum-Mensah argues that the trusteeship ideas, particularly as articulated by

Europeans, shaped African understandings of themselves and their society. He examines the history of each of these colonial interventions, as well as current modes of practice in present day Africa to trace the connections between them. *Colonial Interventions and Destabilization of African Identities* has sections on governance, space, and religion and Mfum-Mensah argues that their current modes of operation are built directly on the foundations of colonial practices. For example—colonial states created specific spaces where elites, usually white, can live and specific spaces where they force Africans to live. The newly independent governments of African countries relied on the trusteeship ideas originally built by Europeans. The government is not designed to operate efficiently and effectively; it is designed to treat their populations like children who need looking after, a direct callback to European ideas.

If Europeans imagined Africans to be child-like and naïve, their ultimate purpose, at least in Mfum-Mensah's work, is to destabilize African identities. People without a sense of community and communal care are ripe for the plucking by insiders and outsiders who have only their own gain in mind. Ultimately this is a successful argument, although Mfum-Mensah's ambitious scope can at times hamper his ability to successfully make this point. *Colonial Interventions and Destabilization of African Identities* is an explicitly trans-imperial history, which can be useful, but it must be used judiciously. Africa is not one place, it is a complex continent full of people with linguistic, religious, and cultural diversities, just to name a few. At times Mfum-Mensah's work flattens this diversity into a *tabula rasa* so that he can make his imperial arguments. But as historians have shown again and again, Africans are not a blank slate—they use the tools given to them by imperialists for their own ends and within their own cultural contexts and to deny them that agency is a disservice to the complexity of the ways in

which Africans responded to and fought back against this ‘organized infantilization’ foisted upon them.

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