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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Achebe, Chinua. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. London: Allen Lane (Penguin), 2012, 352 pp, ISBN 9781846145766.**

For nearly one year now, the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) has supported a reading group held at the University of Melbourne. Comprised of academics, students and AFSAAP members, the reading group has been a space for discussion and debate on works on Africa and writings by Africans. Meeting every six weeks, reading group texts have ranged from books (Kwame Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* and Jean-Francois Bayart's *The State of Africa: The Politics of the Belly*) to journal articles centred on a theme (in our case, mobility), to novels (Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). After reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* last year it seemed natural that our first reading group for 2013 would focus on Achebe's latest book, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Sadly this book is also Achebe's last, as he passed away on 21 March 2013. Hailed as a long-awaited personal memoir, high expectations were held for *There Was a Country* that has received a mixed response from reviewers generally and our reading group.

*There Was a Country* is Achebe's reflection on the Biafran War (1967-70). It provides a detailed account of events that led to the war, the war itself and the aftermath that Achebe concludes is still being felt in Nigeria to this day. One cannot fault Achebe's desire to tell this story which he sums up as "our story, my story" (p.3) and he weaves poetry throughout his prose on the war. Achebe's intimate knowledge of dates and events as well as influential characters in Nigerian politics and specifically the Igbo ethnic group, makes for a detailed history of the war as seen through the eyes of someone on the ground. Certainly anyone seeking a timeline of events or a record of the Biafran War would find *There Was a Country* essential reading.

Yet reading group members felt less comfortable with Achebe's deeply personal and highly partial account as a member of the Igbo ethnic group himself. While Achebe writes that he "will be the first to concede that the Igbo as a group is not without its flaws" (p.76), very few of these flaws are given much attention. At times *There Was a Country*

reads as if Achebe is not only setting the record but correcting the record with a defensive tone permeating the book. Such a perspective is not unexpected when Achebe writes of his personal role as a voice for the Igbo people's struggles and his own sense of loss as a displaced person during the war. As an author reflecting on past events, Achebe's nostalgia ranges from being defensive to bitter and self-congratulatory. All of these positions could be contained in the book, had it been better edited with the four disparate parts (covering Achebe's own childhood and personal story, the Nigeria-Biafran War, the end of the War and Nigeria's political transitions) brought together and used to present an account that builds on one person's perspective to tell a larger story. Instead sections are disjointed and many parts of the book are overwhelmed with multiple, distracting sub-headings.

*There Was a Country* ends with a postscript on 'The Example of Nelson Mandela' that sparked some discussion in the reading group. In his postscript Achebe writes an almost-soliloquy on leadership centred on the question 'what do African leaders envision for their countries and their people?' (p.257). Had greater attention been paid to this question in earlier sections, and to providing a sense of continuity for the reader across the four parts of the book as noted above, perhaps more could have been gleaned from Achebe's answer suggesting that Mandela is the finest example of leadership to be found in Africa. Reading group members found that Achebe's fascination with leadership is a topic often returned to by writers concerned about conflict in Africa. Many other writers express concern about the role of citizens that is often over-shadowed by the importance they place on the role of leaders and the disappointment of so many leaders. Indeed Achebe also discusses corruption and violence in Nigeria, and foresees that "this mindless carnage will end only with the dismantling of the present corrupt political system and banishment of the cult of mediocrity that runs it, hopefully through a peaceful, democratic process" (p.251). In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brought to life some elements of these timeless struggles of transition and change in the form of a novel and fictional characters. Unfortunately he has been unable to convey the same power and achieve a similar sense of empathy through his first-person memoir *There Was a Country*.

For readers of African writing from fiction, to poetry and essays, Chinua Achebe has given us works that will continue to provoke discussion and debate long into the future. It is fitting that two of his books have been

part of AFSAAP's inaugural reading group list and along with many other African scholars we acknowledge the immense contribution he has made to African scholarship and literature. His legacy will undoubtedly be to inspire future generations of writers and intellectuals; his final memoir, *There Was a Country*, might also motivate a new generation of leaders to learn from the lessons and experiences of the Biafran War.

**Melissa Philips**

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**Hesse, Brian, ed. *Somalia: State Collapse, Terrorism and Piracy*. London: Routledge, 2012, 119 pp, ISBN 9780415828932.**

Brian Hesse's edited booklet is a collection of articles published in a special 2010 issue of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. As such, it has the brevity to appeal to general readers fancying an interest in Somali or Horn of Africa affairs. Since this is a simple reprint of seven articles published in an academic journal, there is considerable overlap and repetition in discussing the background on Somalia (usually a brief historical/political outline of Somalia's past) and the work could have benefitted from more coordination or editing to take this into account. However, this does not in any way render the book boring or difficult to read and overall both general readers and academics will benefit from this work. Although the subject matter discussed is some two years old and several important political developments have taken place in Somalia since its publication (most notably the election of a new Somali Federal President and Parliament, and the considerable territorial gains made by African Union forces in their fight against Al-Shabaab in Somalia), many of the arguments expressed are still relevant.

In his introduction, Hesse does a very good job of outlining and explaining Somali lineages, clan structures, and history since colonial times. By titling the introduction "The myth of Somalia" Hesse also hints at the idea (later explicitly stated) that Somali unity or Somalia as a state is a complex and often contested concept. After reading all of the articles, the reader certainly gets a better appreciation of this statement. The various contributions to the booklet highlight a diverse range of important issues impacting Somalia's political reality. While there is not enough room here to recount all of the arguments raised by the contributors, some important ideas should be noted.

Apuuli Kasaija's chapter on the UN-led Djibouti peace process of 2008-2009 offers a very clear account of the various internationally backed Somali peace conferences, and one of the most important and still relevant arguments coming out of this chapter is that "every peace initiative in Somalia has been carefully watched by immediate and far-afield neighbours to make sure that any Somali administration that emerges does not damage their interests" (p.29). Donovan C. Chau discusses the often neglected issue of Kenyan Somalis, and their possible role or influence on security developments in Somalia. While there have been several cases of Kenyan Somalis fighting alongside Al-Shabaab or other Islamic militants in Somalia, it would appear that the Kenyan government has played a more prominent role than Somali Islamist militants in mobilising and training Kenyan Somalis for the fight in Somalia. As Chau points out, the Kenyan government in cooperation with the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia, had been training a force of some 2500 Somalis in Kenya, with the aim of sending them to Somalia to fight Islamist militants there (p.59).<sup>1</sup>

In the last article, Brian Hesse gives a good account of "where Somalia works." Hesse outlines the bases for economic activities in Somalia, namely the money transfer *hawala* system, and the local microcredit scheme known as *hagbed*, and then discusses amongst other things state-building successes in Somaliland, and to a lesser extent Puntland. Hesse concludes that Somalia is not entirely dysfunctional and that some parts of the economy and social and political landscapes work quite well, but that they themselves are ironically an indication of what is wrong with the country (e.g. *hawala* and *hagbed* schemes are omnipresent because there is no formal banking system, telecommunications markets are "unfettered" because there is often no single governing authority to provide law and order). However, one wonders what influence a law and order authority would have on 'fettering' the telecommunications market in Somalia and even if that

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<sup>1</sup> What is now confirmed by leaked US Embassy diplomatic cables is that Kenya has since 2009 been officially planning a policy of establishing a buffer zone in Somalia's Juba Valley which would be ruled by a friendly regime and supported by the Kenyan trained Somalia fighting force. See United States, *Somalia – Maneuvering Toward Jubaland*, Nairobi, July 21, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=217439> (accessed 21 March 2013), United States, *Ethiopian PM Considering Pro-Active Options on Eritrea, Support's Kenya's Jubaland Initiative*, Addis Ababa, November 30, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=237190> (accessed 21 March 2013).

influence would be beneficial for the customers. On the other hand, even if there was a strong banking system in Somalia, would that really make a difference to the *hawala* and *hagbed* arrangements, which are based on trust (and as the author himself argues generally work quite well). It is quite possible that most of Somalia's abjectly poor population would not even have much access to formal banking services such as credits and loans, as they could not qualify for them.

Finally, there are several important academic criticisms that should be pointed out. Although none of these issues would influence the general reader's impression of the book, knowing that these chapters were first published as articles in a very prominent African Studies journal raises some concerns as to that journal's editing vigilance. For example, there is the issue of sloppy referencing when on p.4 Hesse quotes the prominent Somali scholar Ioan Lewis citing a secondary source, Carlson 2009. Yet the very sentence he quotes is written in Lewis 2008, which Hesse himself cited one page earlier. Citing Carlson would have been understandable if he undertook a laborious archival research project to unearth Lewis' quotations, but since Hesse already had and quoted from Lewis' book this is not the case. On p.17 Kasaija explicitly states that the US, "through the CIA" financed Somali warlords fighting Islamists in and around Mogadishu, citing Menkhaus 2007 as the source. However, a search of Menkhaus' whole article does not yield one reference to the CIA. On p.39 Ibrahim states that the US military base in Djibouti was established as part of the "East Africa Counter-Terrorism Initiative, with a primary focus on boosting the capabilities of the states of the region to resist radicalising, violent Islamist influences," citing Kean et al. 2005 as the source. The problem with this is that Keane et al. do not even mention the terms 'Djibouti', 'base', or 'Islam' once in their report. Lastly, on p. 95 Hesse argues that Somalia has more mobile phone subscriptions per 1000 residents than Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Unfortunately, his argument is wrong (or only half right) as the references he cites in support of the argument (Alsoswa et al. 2009, p. 258, and UNCTAD 2009, pp. 96-7) actually clearly state that this is not the case; both Egypt and Kenya have more mobile phone subscribers than Somalia. To his credit Dr Hesse admitted his mistake when I contacted him about it in December 2011.

**Nikola Pijovic**

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**A Problem in the Horn: Strategic Considerations of Somalia and its People. Review of Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State*. London: Zed Books, 2012, 232 pp, ISBN 9781842779330.**

Why should one care about events in Somalia? Outside of the people who reside in the place, that is, Somalis themselves, why would anyone trouble oneself with this, seemingly intractable, problem in the Horn of Africa? International politics, particularly strategy in international politics encourages one to consider problems in different regions of the world from historical and geographic perspectives. For those in the West, especially Western Europe and the United States, the Horn of Africa has been a location of strategic importance for over a century, sitting astride major sea lines of communication, across from the Arabian Peninsula. The British, the Italians, and the French were the first to learn of the strategic problem in the Horn from the nineteenth century onward. More recently, in the twentieth century, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China have all had strategic interests and challenges in the Horn of Africa. Today, therefore, the Horn remains a strategic problem for Somalis as well as peoples and nations around the world.

Thus, a book about Somalia was and remains relevant. Mary Harper's book, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State*, adds to the existing literature and is part of a series of short books called "African Arguments." The series editors are two well-regarded scholars of African studies, Alex de Waal and Richard Dowden, who continue to promote the study of Africa from their respective organizations, the Social Science Research Council and the Royal African Society. I respect their work immensely and have used them in my own research and teaching. The African Arguments series appears to be an attempt to broaden general understanding of Africa and issues on the continent. In my assessment, however, Harper's book falls short of significant aspects of the series' aims while, at times, meeting others.

The useful parts of Harper's book, in line with the series' objectives, include its length, accessibility, and topic. The writing is simple and straightforward, obviously targeted to a general audience. In addition, there is a three-page chronology, four maps, and figure displaying Somali clan affiliations – all concise and helpful. Harper is a BBC journalist with two decades of experience in Somalia who has also



written for publications like the *Washington Post* and the *Economist* (where Dowden was an editor). The book demonstrates some clear understanding of Somalia in chapters one (“Clan and Country”) and two (“History”), from its geography (p.14) and history (pp.48 and 64) to its people (pp.22 and 42) and politics (pp.3, 8, and 38). Harper is at her best in the book when she tells stories, whether it is about Dahabshiil (p.120), a money transfer company, or when discussing who she describes as “Somaliland Pioneers” (p.127). Harper uses her strengths as a seasoned journalist to bring Somalia and Somalis alive to the reader and, for this, she must be commended.

Nevertheless, Harper’s book falls short, and dangerously so, in a number of important areas. While the subject of the book is topical, the work itself lacks in scholarship. There is a bibliography comprising only one-and-a-half pages. The quality and content of chapters three (“Islamism”), five (“Piracy”), and six (“Somalia and the outside world”) reveal this lack of scholarship. Being educated at well-known British universities (Cambridge and the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies), Harper must surely know the importance of scholarship to any work. The book series’ editors, de Waal and Dowden, must take some of the responsibility for this as well. One, however, may attribute the book’s dearth of scholarship to the desire to make the book accessible to the general reader.

But even more disconcerting is the book’s biases which verge on anti-Americanism, at a minimum, and anti-George W. Bush-ism, at a maximum (pp.103, 169, and 177). For example, singling out former Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer for poor U.S. Somali policy is simply unprofessional and really unfounded, given the nature of U.S. policymaking. Also, why no scorn for current President Barack Obama and his administration’s Somali policy, which is a sad example of war by proxy? Perhaps such biases are acceptable in the field of journalism and in the newsrooms of Europe, even for a reputable source like the BBC. Yet for a published book, a work about African politics for the general reader, one finds such polemics dangerously skewed and prejudiced. I would assume the editors of the series did not intend this at all.

Even beyond the lack of scholarship and author biases, sadly Harper’s book leaves the readers with more questions than answers. With a straw man argument about the constant negative perceptions of Somalia

(p.105), the author is unintelligible and confusing when she discusses how Somalis may be “beyond the nation-state” (p.200) whose solutions must come from the bottom up (p.179). The entire book may be summed up in a sentence: “The dynamism of Eastleigh, the stability of Somaliland and the relative peace brought about by the Union of Islamic Courts are all examples of how Somalis can ‘get it right’ by operating largely on their own initiative and doing things their own way” (p.195). The sentence is much clearer within the context of the general work yet still lacks in overall substance. People generally get things “right” when they do things themselves. So, what?

Overall, then, the book does not get to the heart of the problem of Somalia and its people. For example, how is Somalia changing, strategically? Who is benefiting from these changes, if any, and, how so? Answers to these questions are much better derived by reading classic works by I. M. Lewis (still, the doyen of Somali studies) and E. R. Turton (there is no mention at all of the latter in the bibliography). Scholars such as these observed long ago that Somalis are at once “excessively hostile and fanatical” and “champions of resistance” but also “clearly rank with the Indians and Arabs and are superior even to the Swahili,” with “capacity for devotion and discipline, and latent powers of organizations.” Perhaps this is what the editors of the series intended, to generate arguments about Africa, in this case, a strategic problem in the Horn of Africa – the problem of Somalia.

**Donovan C. Chau**

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**Makoba, Johnson W. *Rethinking Development Strategies in Africa.* Oxford, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 2011, 269 pp, ISBN 9783035301953.**

Dr Makoba’s book is a timely contribution to the subject of development in Africa. The author undertakes a huge task of reviewing the performance by development-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and microfinance institutions (MFIs) with a special focus on Uganda. The book consists of seven chapters including a comprehensive bibliography. Through an evaluative and analytical approach Dr Makoba reviews NGOs and MFIs operations in Africa, revealing constraining factors to their effectiveness in fulfilling their

objectives. He also examines the ideologies and politics underlying microfinance agendas, in particular the ‘socially’ and the ‘commercially’ driven approaches. The central thesis in Dr Makoba’s book is the preposition of “The Triple Partnership for Development” as an alternative strategy for enhancing effectiveness of aid to the poor in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this arrangement the developmental state, the non-governmental sector and supporting donor agencies have to work in close partnership. The developmental state is conceived as an active (or proactive) state pursuing a development agenda in collaboration with other important stake holders such as donors, NGOs and MFIs. Such a strategy would be implemented through the establishment of an Autonomous Development Fund (ADF) model, as proposed by Hyden (1995, 1998, 2005, and 2008).

In addition to ensuring that aid is neither controlled by the donors nor recipient governments, the model seeks to achieve the twin goals of greater aid effectiveness and increased local accountability in the concerned countries. For this model to be effective Makoba cautions African leaders by stating that,

Until African leaders and their people realise it is their responsibility to improve the current political and economic situation, nothing significant will happen. In particular, African leaders will not only need to embrace the new thinking about dispensing foreign aid, they will also need to have the commitment and political will to experiment with Autonomous Development Funds (ADFs). Furthermore, African leaders will need the discipline and fortitude to seek to reduce patronage and corruption and genuinely to pursue a policy driven development agenda (p.194).

Indeed given the current trend in high profile corruption incidents (highlighted by cases such as the Global Fund scandal in 2006; the Temangalo corruption scandal in 2008; the Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting corruption scandal from 2011; or Uganda’s Office of the Prime Minister financial scandal in 2012),<sup>1</sup> it makes a lot sense to

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Kelly, “Global fund hails corruption conviction,” *The Guardian*, April 17, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/katine/2009/apr/17/ugandan-official-corruption-conviction>, (accessed 16 January 2013); John Njoroge, “Temangalo scandal consumes nations,” *The Independent*, December 25, 2008,

have an autonomous body which coordinates the management of aid with minimal political interference. Its effectiveness however will depend on the commitment of the state. Authoritarian and corrupt governments are likely to undermine the autonomy of ADFs and consequently diminish the effectiveness of the partnership arrangements rendering the model unworkable. However, there is evidence to suggest that some African governments are starting to respond to good governance protocols as can be seen by the establishment of The African Review Mechanism (APRM).<sup>2</sup>

Dr Makoba's work is a very important contribution to scholarship in the area of aid and Africa's development. The book is lucidly written, concise and yet comprehensive in its treatment of the subject matter discussed. There is evidence of extensive readership, research and a deep grasp of the issues relating to NGOs, MFIs, the State and development in Africa. Furthermore Dr Makoba adds a comparative context to his discussion of the African situation by making reference to Asia and Latin America.

Dr Makoba's book will be useful to faculties working in areas of development studies in Africa both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The book is also suitable for a general reader who is interested or working in the area of development in Africa.

**Peter Mbago Wakholi**

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<http://www.independent.co.ug/index.php/news/news-analysis/79-news-analysis/436-temangalo-scandal-consumes-nation>, (accessed 17 January 2013); BBC, *Uganda Chogm ministers face fraud charges*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15190664>, (accessed 17 January 2013); New Vision, *Envoys reveal why donor funds are easily stolen*, January 14, 2013, <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/638857-envoys-reveal-why-donor-funds-are-easily-stolen.html>, (accessed 17 January 2013).

<sup>2</sup> NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency, *African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)*, <http://www.nepad.org/economicandcorporategovernance/african-peer-review-mechanism/about> (accessed 16 January 2013).