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Book Reviews

Tseggai Isaac and Andrew Targowski (eds.), *African Civilization in the 21st Century*. Focus on Civilizations and Cultures Series. New York: Nova Publishers, 2015

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

Some fifty-two years ago, the eminent journalist-turned-historian, Basil Davidson, published *Which Way Africa? The Search for a New Society* (London: Penguin, 1964), a book that asked questions about the future of economic and political development in Africa, pan-Africanism, the role of elites, the colonial heritage, and much more. It ended with a number of question marks but with the hope that by adopting a radical reform agenda enlightened leaders would be able to offer Africa a bright future.

Half a century later, the five contributors to the present volume, two of whom are its editors, have asked the same question. Their answer falls somewhere between non-committal and pessimistic given what they consider to have been the negative heritages of Islam, the slave trade, and colonialism—“400 years of Africa’s devastation by outsiders...” (p. ix). Modernization, the editors assert, is required, and they group modernization policies under four headings: Westernization, Africanization, Sinozation, and Globalization, proposing to evaluate them “with the civilization approach which is characterized by a big-picture view of the integration of society, culture (including religion), and infrastructure over a long-time on a large territory” (Ibid).

The leading spirit behind this book, who is also its co-editor, is Professor Andrew Targowski, a Polish-born Informatics specialist. Currently Distinguished Professor of Computer Information Systems at Western Michigan University, his reflections about the effects of the communications revolution pushed him to become a humanist, mastering the social sciences and the humanities. In addition to co-authoring the “Foreword” along with Dr. Tseggai Isaac, Associate Professor of History and Political Science at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, Professor Targowski has written five of the fourteen chapters of this book including the concluding chapter; Professor Isaac, four chapters; Professor Sisay Asefa, Director of the Center for African Development Policy Research at Western Michigan University, two chapters, and Dr. David Wilkinson, Professor of Political Science at UCLA and Professor Herménégilde Rwantagbugu, Professor of Comparative Intercultural Education at the University of Burundi, one chapter apiece.

The various chapters do not necessarily speak to one another in a systematic way. Many of them give the impression that they were written as conference papers or for publication as journal articles but ended up as contributions to this volume. Nevertheless, the first five chapters, two by Professor Targowski, two by Professor Isaac, and one by Professor Wilkinson, propose varying approaches to the identification, conceptualization, and characterization of civilizations, particularly African civilizations. The remaining chapters of the book elaborate further on points raised in the first five chapters. The emphasis of the

book is on Sub-Saharan Africa even though the title designates Africa as a whole. Also, given that Professor Isaac is of Eritrean origin and Professor Asefa, of Ethiopian origin, the book as a whole offers a strong Ethiopian/Eritrean slant. The editors strive to present African civilization in holistic terms. They stress the importance of Africa as the continent on which humanity evolved and spread to the rest of the world. They recognize that the Nile Valley gave rise to one of the earliest and greatest civilizations, that of ancient Egypt.

Although Professor Isaac states in Chapter 1, “The Civilization Approach to Analytical Orthodoxy: Solution for or Conveyor of Political Decay to Africa’s Post-Colonial Struggles in the 21st Century” that he “will defer in providing a definition of civilization” (p. 3), he nevertheless asserts that “What is civilized is not coarse or pedestrian. Civilizations empower and ennoble human beings, because a civilized social or political environment is a reflection of an enlightened mind” (p. 1). He criticizes the attempts made by western scholars to deny the African origins of the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Nubia, Axum, and Ethiopia. In Chapter 4, “Making the Case for Ethiopian Civilization”, he stresses the originality and richness of Ethiopian civilization that received Christianity from outside Africa in 330 CE and survived as a distinct Christian African civilization, despite serious challenges.

In Chapter 2, “Africa as the Hub of Mankind and Its Civilizations”, Professor Targowski, acknowledging eastern Africa as the birthplace of humanity, cites the pioneering efforts of African societies to develop iron smelting. In parallel he characterizes the evolution of civilizations in terms of the developing information-communication system (INFOCO) that he traces through six stages: speech, writing, the printed book, computerization, telecommunication networks, and virtual civilization (pp. 34-37). Today a billion people have access to INFOCO 5 and 6 Some 5.2 billion do not have access. Which group has the better chance of survival, Targowski asks, *homo electronicus* or *homo tributus* (those with no computer access)? Targowski does not answer his question but indicates that Africa has not yet reached the stages of INFOCO 5 or 6 (p. 37).

In Chapter 5, “The Civilization Index and African Civilization in the 21st Century”, Professor Targowski assesses the status and role of African civilization with regard to what he calls “rising Global Civilization in the 21st century” (p. 85). Taking into account the criteria of a Civilization Index that he has devised and that includes “communication system”, “power system”, and “infrastructure system” (p. 95), he concludes that Africa is the lowest-ranked among the civilizations of the contemporary world. For African civilization to escape from this negative situation, it must strive to become a “Wise Civilization” (p. 104).

“Wise civilization” is a concept that Professor Targowski has developed to designate a society that is ecologically sustainable in every way and that rejects the excesses of “Turbo-Capitalism” that is oriented towards global business and excessive profits, democratic socialism that he judges to be excessively expensive, and communism that he views as murderous to people and dangerous to the environment. African Civilization, indeed

humanity in general, must develop what Professor Targowski calls “Ecologism...a new socio-political system” (p. 101) that includes a number of ecology oriented subsystems: “eco-education”, “eco-democracy”, “eco-justice”, “eco-infrastructure”, “deep economics [that] includes environmental and social costs alongside those of business and administration into cost-effectiveness calculations” and “deep media” [that] informs the society of the plight and development of the sustainable civilization” (Ibid). Professor Targowski insists that Africa must vastly reduce its rate of population increase, invest heavily in education to create a “sustainable intellectual elite”, expand its sources of clean water, improve governance and end regional conflicts, and define “the goals and strategies which are specific for African Civilization” (pp, 97-99). The cement holding together the components of a Wise Civilization is a kind of social gospel that Professor Targowski labels as Spirituality, a composite of the most positive teachings of the world religions and secular philosophies having the greatest universal relevance. Thus Africa can strive to modernize without necessarily westernizing and, as Targowski hopes, can “correct the actual model of world development, which is based on super-consumerism, never-ending industrialization and unwise applications of technology” (p. 104).

Altogether, it is evident that Professor Isaac and Professor Targowski approach African Civilization in ways that are holistic, humanistic, and subjective. In Chapter 3, “The Civilizations of Africa”, Professor David Wilkinson, proposes a different approach. He conceptualizes African civilizations strictly in terms of quantifiable data and thus argues that only independently developing societies that have evolved “citified” population centers—cities—with over 10,000 human inhabitants apiece can be counted as civilizations. Prior to incorporation into “global civilization”, according to him, there were six independently developing civilizations in Africa: Egyptian/Northeastern African, West African, Gold Coast, East African Coastal, West Central African, and South African. Added to these, six more civilizations may have had independent origins, and five are extensions of these twelve. An additional civilization labeled African Great Lakes may also have been an independent civilization (p. 41). For him, “civilizations are societies of states and cities networked by war, diplomacy and power (and *not* cultures)..., [and] judgments as to the civilizational status of societies [are] a mere matter of fact (and *not* of value)....” (p. 53).

The eight topical chapters that follow develop specific points raised in the first five chapters. In Chapter 6, “The Impact of Religion on African Civilization in Light of the 21st Century”, Professor Isaac evokes the role of Africans in establishing the early Christian churches. Later, as Isaac argues, indigenous African Christian civilization was snuffed out by Islam except in Ethiopia where it survived heroically. The Christianity brought to Africa by Western European missionaries was tainted by its involvement first in the slave trade and then in colonialism. Africa, he concludes, became a “victimized Continent, transgressed by Islamic and European Civilization”. (p. 105).

In Chapter 7, “Language and Education in African Civilization in the 21st Century”, Professor Isaac deplors the poor development of education in the post-colonial societies

of Sub-Sahara Africa. He cites the poor linkages between the use of indigenous languages at local level and colonial languages at national level. Children, he argues should receive their primary education in their mother tongues. While he recognizes the usefulness of the colonial languages, he would like to see greater use made internationally of certain regional languages like Swahili and Hausa. Education, he insists, must be made available to everybody, a difficult task in Africa given that the many dictators who seized power in various African countries restricted the scope of education so as to reduce threats to their power. Ultimately and despite Professor Isaac's doubts about the pervasiveness of the colonial languages, he believes that Africans should continue to rely on them while becoming increasingly multi-lingual.

In Chapter 8, "Globalization and the Fate of African Traditional Institutions: The Case of the Bashingantahe Order in Burundi in the 21st Century", Professor Herménégilde Rwantabagu makes the case for reviving the Bashingantahe, a council of wise and righteous elders in pre-colonial Burundi that safeguarded peace and social harmony. The colonial and post-colonial regimes marginalized the Bashingantahe. In post-conflict Burundi a modernized Bashingantahe is being restored to its traditional place. Modernizing and restoring such organizations in other African societies, Professor Rwantagagu states, will assist in maintaining stability and peace and will contribute to the revalorization of traditional African institutions in a globalizing world.

In Chapter 9, "The Impact of Global Geopolitics on the Ethiopian Civilization, One of the Earliest in the World", Professor Sisay Asefa traces the history of Ethiopia from its Axumite origins to the present stressing its location in that part of Africa where humanity arose, its resistance first to Islamization and then to Italian colonialism, its attempts to modernize under Emperor Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie, and its involvement in the Cold War. For Professor Asefa, the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and the establishment of a Marxist government was a disaster from which Ethiopia and Eritrea have not completely recovered even though this government was overthrown in 1991.

In Chapter 10, "African Civilization and Infrastructure in the 21st Century", Professor Targowski judges African infrastructure to be inadequate in almost every respect. He points out that "long-distance trade and commerce [functioned] better during colonial times..." (p. 194). Africa is urbanizing rapidly, but the cities cannot support their inhabitants, increasing numbers of whom live in slums. A success, however, has been the African adaptation of wireless communication which has enabled many Africans to expand their possibilities of communication with the world at large.

In Chapter 11, "The Impact of Agriculture on African Civilization in the 21st Century", Professor Targowski recognizes the potential for Sub-Sahara Africa to feed itself many times over; however, this potential is not being realized because of bad governance, poor planning, and water shortages. Indeed, half of the African population lacks access to clean water. Nevertheless, various African countries have initiated projects to increase agricultural output, and Africa continues to be the recipient of agricultural aid from

international organizations like the FAO, from NGO's, and from individual donor countries. Greater success has been achieved in promoting small-scale but modernized farming rather than large-scale agricultural projects.

In Chapter 12, "The African Governance Challenges in Global Economy and Society in the 21st Century, the Case of Ethiopia", Professor Asefa suggests that the authoritarianism of colonial rule led to the takeover of many African countries by military and/or civilian dictators whose self-serving regimes set back the economies of the given countries, hindered education, and destroyed popular participation in government. The end of the Cold War in 1991 and the ending of apartheid in South Africa have sped up the democratization of African countries that had begun slowly in the 1980's.

In Chapter 13, "African Civilization versus Global Waves and Civilization in the 21st Century" Professor Targowski asks whether African Civilization can compete with other civilizations in a globalized world given that prior globalization waves harmed Africa. According to him, the first of these waves that was initiated by the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries led to the Atlantic slave trade that removed around 20 million persons from Africa (p. 236). The second wave, the "*Pax Britannica*", contributed strongly to the generalization of colonial rule which limited economic development, particularly manufacturing, and eventually led to mass poverty. Arbitrarily set colonial frontiers led to ethnic violence. Although the Third Globalization Wave in the 20th century, the "*Pax Americana*" and the "*Pax Sovietica*", did stimulate decolonization, the involvement of the newly independent countries in the Cold War often had negative consequences. The Fourth Globalization Wave, the *Pax Consortia*, which began in the 1990's has led to greater prosperity for some countries through increased investment in the extractive industries in Africa.

Today African Civilization is faced with what Professor Targowski calls the Fifth Globalization, the "*Pax Virtualiziana*", the global economy supported by the "integrated information infrastructure". Will Facebook, as a result, become the first example of the Global Virtual Nation? "Can Africans be part of the Global Virtual Nation or could they develop the African Virtual Nation" (p. 246)?

Professor Targowski has doubts about the capacity of Africa to profit from globalization. He fears that the continent will continue to be used as a source of raw materials the extraction of which will not benefit the African masses even though such exploitation enriches a westernized elite. He is particularly worried about what he calls the second scramble for Africa: the competition of China, the United States, and the European Union to carve out economic niches for themselves in Africa, the Chinese being particularly persistent in doing so. He ends the chapter by suggesting that the UN-sponsored Millennium Developmental Goals, although laudable, are not all too suitable for Africa because they do not include the need to reduce the rate of population increase by promoting efficient birth control methods. Thus he proposes a set of African Sustainability Goals that stress birth control and environmental education and protection.

In Chapter 14, “Where is Africa Heading?” that concludes the volume, Professor Targowski once again evokes the importance of his African Sustainability Goals arguing that they will “bring in a new perspective on the sustainable development of African Civilization” (p. 268). But will these goals be adopted and if so, how and by whom?

Altogether this book is a very good read for non-experts wishing to obtain a broad spectrum of information on contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa even if it is overly focused on Ethiopia. For readers who wish to learn more about given topics, the chapter bibliographies offer many suggestions for further reading. The figures, graphs, and charts appearing in the chapters written by Professor Targowski are useful learning aids. Unfortunately Nova Press did not copyedit and proofread the manuscript before publication. There are numerous typographical, stylistic, and grammatical errors. Frequently references cited in the text are not included in the lists of references appearing at the end of each chapter.