

Africa: Heart of despair, History of continent's fight for freedom fails to acknowledge West's culpability, [The Nova Scotian](#), 27 February 2006.

By JOAN BAXTER

Book Review: The Fate of Africa From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair: A History of 50 Years of Independence, by Martin Meredith (Public Affairs/Perseus Books Group, hardcover, 752 pages, \$45)

The late West African philosopher and author, Amadou Hampate Bâ, had this to say about history and its writing: "Until the lion tells the story, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

He was speaking metaphorically about Africa's history and how European conquerors, "discoverers" and colonists have generally portrayed it in their writings.

Unfortunately, Hampate Bâ is no longer alive to give us his take on the neo-colonialism in Africa today — the financial and political carrots and sticks used to maintain foreign control of the continent and its resources.

Many African scholars depict these as more pervasive, insidious and destructive than even the hands-on colonial policies of pith-helmeted Europeans of yesteryear.

In his massive new tome on 50 years of African history, author and journalist Martin Meredith downplays or simply ignores neo-colonialism and the devastating lasting effects of colonialism.

In fact neither of these terms even make it into his impressive 18-page index. And this is why, despite the wealth of information it contains, I find this book deeply flawed.

Yes, Africa has had some atrocious leadership — but why?

*The unsettling premise that seems to have been written in invisible ink as a running footer in *The Fate of Africa* is that there is something inherently wrong with Africans that makes them unable to govern themselves.*

Implicit in the way Meredith shapes his damning narrative is that African leaders just can't help being either raving idealistic lunatics who need to be taken out by wiser and smarter people in the CIA — in the case of Patrice Lumumba — or monstrous parodies of bloodthirsty megalomaniacs, including such erstwhile friends of the West as Central Africa's Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Uganda's Idi Amin or Zaire's (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) Joseph Desiré Mobutu.

Mobutu was the man the CIA and Belgian secret service handpicked to rule in Congo, after they had removed Patrice Lumumba and had him killed. Meredith dutifully quotes CIA chiefs who describe Patrice Lumumba as "a mad dog", "ill-prepared for office", a "grave danger", and a Belgian official who calls the assassination "a public health measure."

Lumumba was, in fact, a staunch nationalist who threatened American and European interests in his country.

He spoke openly about taking control of some of his country's vast natural resources, which Europeans had been pillaging since the late 1800s, when Belgian King Leopold ran the Congo as his own private fiefdom, orchestrating the plunder of ivory and rubber that resulted in the deaths of more than 10 million people.

Mobutu continued in the tradition of his idol, King Leopold, plundering his country for 32 years.

In all that time his "friends" in Washington (including the Bush family) and in Europe coddled and supported him.

And while Meredith seems to enjoy portraying in minute detail Mobutu's grotesque excesses, he notes only as an aside the Western help in making and maintaining the kleptomaniac. And he draws the illogical conclusion that the United States and Belgian interference in and military support for Mobutu, were "to keep the Congo from disintegrating."

And this is just one small example of how dismissive Meredith is of nefarious and self-serving Western kingmakers meddling in African affairs that have helped turn the continent into what he has decided is the "heart of despair."

Despite its long-winded and all-encompassing title that suggests this is the definitive tome on post-independent Africa, and despite its impressive 27-page bibliography, Meredith is highly selective in what he decides to cover, how he covers it and also in what he decides to ignore, or gloss over because it does not fit well with his dogged determination to portray Africans as hopeless and the West as purely noble and benevolent.

*Unlike Stephen Lewis in his passionate book, *Race Against Time*, Meredith would have readers believe that all those coups to get "friendly" leaders in place, the loans to those corrupt (but friendly!) leaders that led to massive and unfair debt, and secret arms deals that led to horrendous conflicts, were just charitable measures to help save Africans from themselves.*

Certainly, African elites have much to answer for, but they are largely made and sustained by elites abroad whose interests they serve.

This balance of blame is missing in Meredith's analysis.

Most telling of all is that there is not a single word in this 752-page volume about the late Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987.

Sankara is revered today across Africa as the kind of leader the continent had been waiting for. He was a leader who did not conform to the negative fat-cat stereotypes Meredith reinforces.

He was assassinated in a coup covertly supported by both Washington and Paris, who viewed him as a dangerous upstart because his revolutionary ideas of grassroots made-in-Africa development were starting to spread — and threaten Western interests — on the continent.

The lesson, clearly understood by Africans, was that leaders who truly threaten foreign interests and the balance of power on the continent, don't live long.

It is a lesson that Martin Meredith seems not to have learned in his many years in Africa.