

Book Review

John M. Janzen, Harold F. Miller, and John C. Yoder, eds. *Mennonites and Post-Colonial African Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 298 pp.

Ruth Rempel

Associate Professor of International Development
Menno Simons College
Canadian Mennonite University
r.rempel@uwinnipeg.ca

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This is an edited set of biographical and autobiographical essays about Africanists, meaning persons with university degrees, mostly PhDs, whose work focused on the African continent. *Mennonite*, also used in the title, covers a range of Anabaptist denominations. The book is mostly about North Americans and especially about Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The book got its start with a panel at the 2017 (U.S.) African Studies Association conference. A call for papers and shoulder-tapping rounded out the list of contributors (16). The writers of the autobiographical papers were asked to respond to five questions about their encounters with Africa, their perceptions of the continent and its peoples, their careers and the experiences that led to them, as well as how their work was “shaped by the Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective” (17). How the persons featured in the biographical essays were chosen is less clear.

The result is a book with an introduction that identifies a few broad themes plus gives thumbnail sketches of Africanist paradigms in the academic world, perceptions of Africa in Mennonite communities, as well as Mennonite and MCC history. Three essays follow under the heading “Pioneers,” all of them written by editor John Yoder. These three North American men’s experiences with Africa all started in the late colonial era. All also started with missionary work in East or Central Africa, though their careers also involved university teaching and, in one case, work at the World Bank. The next ten chapters cover Africanist professors, all but one of them North American. Next come seven chapters about practitioners, professionals who spent much or all of their careers in development outside the academy, working in fields like education, health, and management. Only one of the contributors to the section on professors and practitioners identifies as a missionary, though a number of those covered initially worked at mission schools. The structure of the book suggests a generational shift from evangelism to development and scholarship as primary ways of engaging with the world. The shift, as evidenced in individual lives and essays, was not as tidy, and the relationship between MCC and mission boards is also more complex.



While the individuals covered in the essays are changed by their experiences, MCC comes across as a static and undifferentiated organization because many of the contributors experienced it briefly and through only one program. The chapters by Ronald Mathies and Sara Regier that discuss the complexity and evolution of MCC are a welcome addition but come late in book.

The book finishes with three brief chapters by Africanists who are not Mennonite but who know Mennonite academics and practitioners. Steve Feierman, Paul Gifford, and Emily Welty were invited to read and respond to the book's essays. They provide varied and interesting commentary on nationalism's impact on Jews and Mennonites, on culture and views of Africa, and on issues of gender, race, and class. A synthesis chapter by the editors would have been helpful, to compare responses to the key questions and discuss various themes and trends.

Light editing produced diverse formats and foci in the essays. Some contributors chronicle experiences and careers, some focus on ideas and intellectual growth, and a few are more analytical. These latter chapters are located toward the end of their respective sections, which provides a little analysis of the book's questions via individual self-reflection. The chapters by Mennonite practitioner Musuto Mutaragara Chirangi and Mennonite-connected professor Saïd Sheikh Samatar, together with the foreword by Aliko Songolo, are opportunities for a different kind of reflection since they offer career comparisons and alternative perspectives on Mennoniteness. Details of the contributors' research and development work is presented in a way accessible to nonspecialists, though this material is likely to be of interest to other academics and practitioners rather than to general readers.

Is there a distinctive Mennonite approach to scholarship and development practice? This is the book's primary question. Peace is the answer most frequently given, but it is clear from the essays that an Anabaptist peace position can range from nonresistance and conscientious objection to peace advocacy and peacemaking. Whether the contributors saw and how they responded to the structural violence of imperialism also varies considerably. The other frequent answer is service, though again this covers a wide range: between MCC voluntary work as "an honored rite of passage" (147), service to others as a value inculcated through Mennonite education, service as an alternative to the military draft, and a stance of "servanthood" (187). An interesting answer, given by several contributors, is a communal orientation. "Community is the center of our lives" and "community is essential for faithful living" are ways Mennonite organizations explain this.¹ This orientation helped Mennonite volunteers understand and connect with African ethnic groups for which the collective rather than the individual was also primary, something for which Musuto Chirangi's chapter offers indirect support. John Yoder used the anthropological concept of a high-context community to analyze this orientation (154). Steven Feierman observed that community

¹ "FAQ About Mennonites," Mennonite Church USA, 2020, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/faq-about-mennonites/>; Barb Draper, "10 Things to Know About Mennonites in Canada," *Canadian Mennonite*, January 12, 2017, <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/10-things-know-about-mennonites-canada>.

and service were “woven through” the lives of the contributors, not a brief interlude at the start of a career, and that they also showed consistency in their faith, work, and personal life (258–259).

An issue that is not discussed, though mentioned in passing by several contributors, is the ambiguous view of higher education in Mennonite circles. The education of many covered in the book started in denominational schools and their first degree came from a denominational college, but post-graduate degrees meant study at secular universities. Many of the contributors also spent their working lives at secular institutions. This trajectory and the attitude of home communities to it are not much discussed; neither is the possibility of a Mennonite public intellectual, raised by Wayne Nafziger (125). Potential connections with Africans’ experiences are also not taken up. These might be familial attitudes toward education like those recounted in Saïd Samatar’s story, or the tone set by post-independence leaders who silenced or exiled their homegrown academics more often than they listened to them.

The generational specificity of this book is another issue that needs more attention. The persons featured are mostly retired, and some have already passed away. With one exception, their initial experiences of Africa occurred between the early 1950s and early 1970s. Most of them came from farm or small-town backgrounds. For American contributors, the Vietnam War draft loomed large, and for several, it was as much a part of their decision to teach in Africa as a culture of service or missionary testimonies. Only two Canadian men were covered in the book, and the difference in their Cold War experience is not explored. What is discussed are the development theories prevailing in those decades, plus a few contributors commented on the ease with which people—meaning white men—could get into African Studies in the 1960s and early 1970s. Curtis Keim was the contributor who highlighted that this generation of Africanists were “mostly men” (79). Steven Feerman believes their MCC and Africanist professional career trajectory was confined to that Cold War generation (261). I can think offhand of four North Americans (including myself), three of them women, who combined MCC terms in eastern Africa, graduate degrees, and Africanist university careers. Soliciting contributions from younger Africanists like these would have deepened the book’s potential for generational and gender analysis.

There are certainly a few women included in the book. They are Karen Keim, Mary Oyer, Lydia Glick Samatar, and Sara Regier, with Karen Keim the only one to have a chapter in which she is the sole subject. Missionary Dorothy Smoker was mentioned several times in the Pioneer chapters, and it is disappointing that she did not also receive her own chapter given her role in connecting Mennonites with the East African Revival. As Emily Welty observes, gender is explicitly discussed in one chapter—Musuto Chirangi’s (268).

Post-colonial, which features in the book’s title, together with *Mennonite* and *Africanist*, is not explained. Use of a hyphen suggests it refers to the era after political independence, though in the African countries discussed that era’s start varied from the late 1950s to the early 1990s. Postcolonial theory and postcolonial African thinkers are not explicitly discussed, though a few are cited. The editors do, however, share an important assumption with postcolonialists: decolonization and development are discourses—ways of thinking about and organizing the world.

The editors use the term *paradigm* rather than *discourse* (2), but the dynamics they describe are similar to those set out in the literature on the discourse of development. This literature assumes development was brought to Africa and the other southern continents by actors from the global North, something the editors also seem to accept. Whether or not one shares that assumption, decolonization should not be lumped in with development as a parallel discourse or paradigm. As John Metzler's description of his upbringing in Jamaica makes clear, imperialism and decolonization were central to the politics of the island's African diaspora and they saw a similar politics in the African continent (101). Metzler's chapter is also the one that offers the frankest discussion of racism.

This book has value, as Gifford said, as a record of these persons and their careers (262). The synthesis and analysis are largely left to readers.