

## *New History of South Africa*

(Tafelberg, 2007)

### **Hermann Giliomee & Bernard Mbenga**

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Historian-editors Hermann Giliomee and Bernard Mbenga's *New History of South Africa* (Tafelberg, 2007) grandly achieves a synthesis of South African history, from the mists of time to the social problems that afflict our society today (2008). They have managed to neatly press our history, from "australophithecines" to today's buppies (black urban professionals) into a mere 437 pages, and that is a feat of prudent selectivity and tight writing. The book consists of fifteen chapters of flowing prose, liberally dashed with photographs, side bars, and a few tables and maps.

Giliomee and Mbenga and some 25 scholars gave various aspects of our history their best shot – and as a team they accomplished this magnificently. Read for instance Rob Shell's section on slavery and its enduring legacy (and be surprised about the lasting effects of this institution) and Richard Mendelsohn's on the Jewish community in South Africa (and be disabused of your stereotypes and prejudices). Giliomee and Mbenga took the scholarship of these historians, fused it masterfully with their own inputs, and connected the many contributions to create a vast epic.

The leaders of this "new history project" follow the known paradigm(s) for ordering our history: pre-colonial era, European settlement, frontier wars and African nationalism, industrialization, segregation, apartheid and "inclusive democracy". There is nothing new in this of course, but how to transcend the perceived, the given, and the accepted epochal blocks with which we have

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so far built history? The editors break with tradition and state up front that we were “migrants all”. The sub-text here is that no one can claim “the land belongs to us”. True, some may have arrived here earlier than others, but land was acquired in the first instance by first settlement (not purchase), and in the second by aggressive (military) conquest (not purchase). The Freedom Charter is correct, then, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it – even the most recent migrants called amakwerekwere. What happened in history, say circa 1600 to 1900 is that differential modes of production and different land conceptions by African and European made the difference in what happened to the land. More often than not, of course, conquest determined “ownership”, and back in history there was nothing wrong with that. All people did it; it was tantamount to natural law.

The authors also follow the given racial categories with which we have always worked: San, Khoi, Dutch, Afrikaners, English, Xhosa, Zulu, Indian, Chinese, etc. Here too we have nothing new. So, in a way, we are still captives of the anthropological approach to the composition of our diverse society, and its fragmented history. This is not even the “new ethnicity”, it is the old one. The fresh dimension of this structured approach, though, resides therein that the authors attempt to explain difference in terms of culture, not ethnicity; self-interest (pragmatism) not traditional loyalty; adjustment to change (growth) instead of immutable cocoons of race, albeit still within the context of political boxes. The sub-theme that runs through and despite this racial or cultural categorization is that all South Africans wanted to make a living and be happy by free choice. They were in fact about “the pursuit of happiness”, to use the American phrase.

Although the interpretive and content boxes are retained, the book, for the most part, endeavors to de-racialize our history, albeit sometimes by means of side bars. Not only this, these deracialized historical episodes are placed in comparative perspective or problematized with alternate sets of evidence.

Here and there, the authors also essentialize historical events. For example, the history of liberation, especially the tail end of it, remains an ANC driven one; the PAC is reduced to Robert Sobukwe in a box and a paragraph on Sharpeville; 1976 remains a Soweto phenomenon – *nou toe nou*; black consciousness is offered as Biko; the frontier wars are still white-against-black affairs, which they most were definitely not! Migrant labour remains an imposition – the manipulation, legally and otherwise (the Glen Grey Act, poll taxes, etc), of people’s needs and vulnerabilities. An alternate scenario might

be that these people (the migrants) were so desperate for subsistence because of the failure of their own society that they had no choice but to migrate.

Then, for a bit of political correctness, the Groot Trek / Voortrekkers are dealt with in two synoptic thrusts: first the need for land, labour and security – for the Dutch. This is definitely Eurocentric justification: 1) there was enough land available, and in fact there still is! 2) labour would be required only by those who had discarded the Adam Smithian notion of as much land a man can work so much does he own, in other words by those who had more land than they could manage and therefore needed labour for the creation of surplus value. That too is not new, it's colonialism at the cusp of modernity, Then the Groot Trek / Voortrekkers are reduced to “white settlement on the highveld” instead of the epic migration of a people who established civilization, in the correct sense of the word, amid African people and despite them. The question, for example, is put: “The Voortrekkers: A Chosen People?” But is that the most relevant question? Should not the question be, “Did the Voortrekkers bring about changes and if so, what are the enduring significance of those changes?”

The resurgence of the Afrikaner in the 1930s and 40s is particularly well done, and spun not around ethnicity or race or culture, as is often the claim in the literature, but shown to have grown on the notion of sovereignty and the yearning of a *volk* (the Afrikaners who believed in the value of the *volks-eie* – that which is organically part of a people) for self-determination. I must wonder, though, if this resurgence did not start earlier, with JBM Hertzog the main architect. After all, he was the most successful architect of Afrikaner empowerment before the ascent of apartheid.

The editors adopted the deft method of juxtaposing text with side bar or by using oppositional side bars (or photographs) to illustrate the two-three sides of a particular story. This way a complex history, one that takes into account more than one body of evidence, emerges.

I was surprised by the paucity of material on the Coloured people of South Africa, a people who had been here from the first. Giliomee has done well aptly naming his book on Coloureds in Stellenbosch *Nog Altyd Hier Gewees*. Now this. But of course, it is a matter of significance and selection. And in this case, taking into account what the team wanted and could deliver. Still, what Les Switzer wrote in 1995, that “South Africa’s Coloured community has remained a marginalized community – marginalized by history and

even historians” holds true for this “new history” also. Historian Mohamed Adhikari’s input, although useful, ends in the mid-air of the 1930s-40s. The implication could be that thereafter the history of the Coloured community, at least in the political context, had no integrity, and that these people flailed in a sea of various forms of Africanism.

I have one gripe. This new history remains hostage of the fallacious idea that politics (political change) equals history. It’s the same old story, although differently packaged. Now the life of any community or nation encompasses the total culture (experience) of that group. That Giliomee and Mbenga’s opus is a new, inclusive political history, albeit as emerged from anthropological mists, there is no doubt. That it offers a wonderfully controlled synthesis is also true. It is mindful of what Lev Tolstoy cautions about in *War and Peace* – that “The life of the nations and of humanity forms the subject of history. Directly to seize and clothe in words, – to describe the life, not of humanity, but even of one nation, presents itself as an impossibility.” Still, I would have liked to see a tad more of the diverse cultural experience of the neatly boxed peoples of South Africa.

Politically correct detractors are no doubt going to reject this synthesis as another Eurocentric interpretation of our history, this because only 5 of the 27 contributors are black, only two of whom are ethnic Africans. Nonsense and poppycock! Here we have the writing of history at the peak of its art and science by the best scholars in the country. And they arrived at this particular history through dead and living bodies of evidence, not through nurtured prejudices. While there are of course biases and omissions in this “new history”, the book unfolds a credible history of South Africa, not one that answers to this or that morality or which offers therapy to those who had been “losers” or “victims” in South African history.

Finally, this “new history” retains the best of the various “schools” of our history, transcending them all. And it is pleasingly offered with many fresh dimensions. Still, although this is an excellent synthesis, nothing in it disturbed me out of any of my historical comfort zones, nothing challenged the hegemony of how people in power presented history in black and white dichotomies.