

Book Review: African Intelligence Services: Early Postcolonial and Contemporary Challenges edited by Ryan Shaffer

In African Intelligence Services: Early Postcolonial and Contemporary Challenges, Ryan Shaffer brings together contributors to explore the histories and transformations of African intelligence services. The book offers an impressive introduction to the role of intelligence services in Africa and will give a strong incentive to researchers to further explore the emerging intelligence literature in African Studies, writes Francois Sennesael.

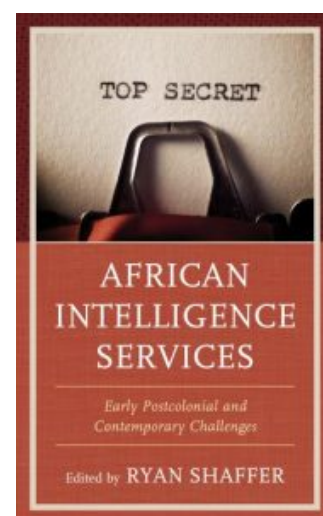
***African Intelligence Services: Early Postcolonial and Contemporary Challenges.* Ryan Shaffer (eds). Rowman & Littlefield. 2021.**

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Africa has often been depicted as a conglomerate of passive agents in the international system, pawns in a greater geopolitical game. The so-called 'Congo Crisis' in 1960 has been extensively researched [through a Cold War prism](#), becoming the prototypical case of a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union in Africa. Similarly, the coup d'état literature strongly emphasises the role of external actors and factors in the manifestation of coups in Africa. Africa's domestic situation, according to this perspective, is only to be understood as the passive product of external structures.

[African Intelligence Services: Early Postcolonial and Contemporary Challenges](#) takes an opposing view. If US, Russian or French activities in Africa are important, African intelligence services have nonetheless been largely overlooked in the literature. Ryan Shaffer's book is therefore part of a broader academic literature taking African agency seriously. Across eleven chapters, it offers many examples of how relevant African intelligence services are to understanding the evolution of African politics across the continent.

This ambitious enterprise is to be lauded, because relatively little is known about the historical role of intelligence services in Africa. There remain many unanswered questions, mainly because writing about the security sector is extremely difficult: by definition, secret services are opaque, even more so in Africa. Each chapter is therefore the result of outstanding archival efforts. The product is a kaleidoscope through which many characteristics of African states can be observed, using different methodologies.





The first part of the book provides detailed information on the early postcolonial period. Four main themes can be extracted from the empirical realities these chapters describe. First, the book demonstrates how colonial structures continued to shape the newly independent intelligence services. The different chapters are perfect empirical examples of what Crawford Young highlighted [in a 2004 article](#): namely, 'the silent incorporation of the colonial state legacy into the postcolonial state'. The study of Kenya's Special Branch in Chapter One is very revealing. It shows how the Special Branch targeted nationalist movements before independence, but then worked alongside these very same politicians using the exact same institutional structure.

Second, the first four chapters also present an interesting perspective on the apex of nationalist and modernist doctrines in Africa, resting on powerful personalities to implement state-led development. The book demonstrates how intelligence services became more at the service of personal domestic interests than addressing external threats. The [uti possidetis](#) principle adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1964, freezing states' borders in Africa, also played a great role in these developments.

Third, the emergence of postcolonial Africa coincides with the peak of the Cold War. Reporting on Tanzania (Chapter Two), Mozambique and Angola (Chapter Three), the book offers important insights on how African regimes used this rivalry for domestic purposes despite the official non-alignment doctrine. Simon Graham's chapter is particularly powerful in demonstrating how political leaders from Tanganyika and Zanzibar, through intelligence services, were 'leveraging inter-German rivalries [...] to bolster their own claim to the leadership of a united Tanzania' (62). These chapters therefore provide a detailed account of what Christopher Clapham named ['the politics of state survival' in Africa](#). They shed light on how African elites have shaped the international environment, while at the same time using it for their own regime survival, with intelligence services deployed to this end.

Fourth, the study of intelligence services is an interesting perspective to investigate the crisis of the postcolonial state in Africa. Focusing on Zimbabwe (Chapter Four) and Liberia (Chapter Six), the book highlights two important factors widely addressed in the African Studies literature, both products and sources of destabilisation: guerrilla insurgencies and patrimonialism, a way to exercise authority relying on a blurred distinction between private and public interests. The former, through the study of Zimbabwe, demonstrates how difficult it is for African intelligence services to deal with insurgencies. This raises questions about the ability of many African states to control their territories, casting a critical eye on the 'reality' of the state beyond an elitist core.

Patrimonialism is often considered a *deus ex machina* in African politics, seen to offer an encompassing and sufficient framework to approach the continent. To that extent, Benjamin Spatz and Alex Bollfrass's study of Liberia represents a refreshing counterpoint. They highlight the bureaucratisation of intelligence services across time and the relative independence of these services when it comes to protecting the state, arguing that patrimonialism is not a comprehensive approach to understanding African politics.

The second part of the book is somewhat more eclectic, as it aims to tackle contemporary challenges, from a historical (Chapters Seven and Nine), institutional (Chapters Eight and Ten) and legal perspective (Chapter Eleven). If one had to highlight one thing, it would be the growing fragmentation of security services in Africa and the creation of parallel, overlapping agencies. The National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) in Sudan (Chapter Seven) is a good example here, being at the service of President al-Bashir's Salvation regime until 2019 and spying on other security agencies. What the Sudan case also emphasises is the organisation of disorder to provoke uncertainty and create the feeling of state presence: something the book does unfortunately not develop enough. The tension between citizens feeling that intelligence services are everywhere and the actual technological capacity of the NISS is unexplored. This could represent an interesting development to better understand state-society relations in Africa, where the feeling of state presence can seem more important than its actual presence.

If each individual chapter is of particular interest, the book does not develop one clear argument, except that intelligence services are important, nor does it offer a broader analytical framework to approach them in Africa. To that extent, the different chapters are not case studies per se, but are rather ends in themselves. Shaffer does not hide these intentions, as he emphasises in his introduction that 'the contributions [...] are too specific and the countries are too diverse to develop a theory'. However, if mere description as a methodological task [has proved to be of great value](#), it is because it still offers arguments about the world. Unfortunately, the book does not infer from the detailed empirical realities, but rather provides the reader with different accounts of intelligence services across the continent, with no intention of generalising or contributing to the literature on state formation, civil-military relations or authoritarianism in Africa. The famous question raised by [Christian Lund](#), 'Of what is this a case?', remains therefore unanswered.

African Intelligence Services is nevertheless an impressive introduction to the role of intelligence services in Africa and it allows the reader to navigate through many major themes of contemporary African politics. It also places politics in time, emphasising the importance of legacy and path dependency to understanding contemporary political events. More importantly, it represents a strong incentive for historians and political scientists to further explore the emerging intelligence literature in African Studies.

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