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- 1 The old academic rider, “It all depends what you mean by...” applies with particular force to discussions of modernity—not just “what” you mean, but “when” and “where” you mean it too. The editors of these interestingly assorted papers have chosen to pluralize the “what” of modernity in Africa; and their contributors pluralize the “where”, “when”, and “who”. If a rather loosely articulated set of proceedings is the outcome, then that is probably the nature of the topic.
- 2 Richard Rathbone kicks off the volume with a “where” that is West Africa (particularly its coastal communities); a “when” that is initially *longue durée*, but narrows first to the Atlantic slave trade and then to the 19th and 20th centuries; and a “who” that latterly consists of newly emergent intellectual and political elites. While insisting that Africa is too complex and varied to permit easy generalization, by modernity Rathbone has in mind expanding commercial circuits, and then national interests undergoing formation, in which the coastal societies were thoroughly involved, and that produced a variant of modernity they were initially more likely to have conceived as “progress”. Southern Ghanaians modernized enthusiastically, in Rathbone’s account, but in a style of their own.
- 3 Two chapters illustrate Rathbone’s contention of intellectual engagement with modernity biographically. From the other side of continent and looking to the 20th century, John Lonsdale extends his rewarding engagement with the personality of Jomo Kenyatta to argue that he was that most modern of figures, the self-aware traditionalist. In Lonsdale’s interpretation, Kenyatta was guided by an understanding of Kikuyu elderhood. “Colonialism was the drill-sergeant of East Africa’s forced march

in modernity...” in Lonsdale’s claim, which already suggests a difference of degree from the West African littoral and its initially commercial inclusion in an Atlantic capitalist system.

- 4 Liz Gunner, speaking from South Africa and mostly about the inter-World War years, also adds to a biography that has preoccupied her thoughts to good effect over many years: that of Prophet Isaiah Shembe. She envisages Shembe addressing a crisis of Zulu memory—a disjunctive consequence of modernity’s relation to the always receding reciprocal it has to leave behind. Whereas Kenyatta made the ideals of elderhood vault the transition to modernity, Shembe meticulously oversaw that transition through the written record of his prayers and hymns, journeys and miracles, and doing so asserted a symbolic community founded in memories shared through the medium of literacy.
- 5 Another technology of modern inscription is taken up by Heike Behrend in her description of the studio photographers of the Likoni ferry in Mombasa. She returns us to the Kenya of Lonsdale’s chapter, but to the post-colonial 1990s and the life worlds of migrant workers coming as strangers to the city. The studio photographers’ competed to attract business by constantly innovating elaborate backgrounds for the portraits that captured their customers’ aspirations for modern paraphernalia—especially fast transport—they could not hope to afford. Such images were often destined to be sent home: for instance to mark those important holidays from which migrants were absent from their homes. The images acted as surrogates for their presence, and the elaborate studio backdrops communicated between the hopes of the migrants and the dreams of those who remained behind. Drawing on the insights critical to their commercial survival, the photographers explained to Behrend how their posed images depicted what was lacking in their customers’ lives. From their own experience of insecurity, the photographers were well positioned to understand modernity as a thwarted aspiration to consumption.
- 6 John Comaroff’s “where” returns us to South Africa, and his “when” to the colonial period. His actor is the “colonial state” rather than the individuals of Gunner and Lonsdale or the status groups of Behrend and Rathbone. And his argument involves intransigent rejection of the application of a concept of modernization to this, and by extension any other, Africa. He advocates Marxist and especially Foucaultian perspectives on the colonial state, questioning the capillary absorption by colonized societies of colonial relations of power. With attention both to history as unequal discursive practice and as unequal material process, Comaroff’s chapter is concerned with understanding the workings of the colonial state in Africa. Comaroff’s most specific engagement with theories of “African modernities” occurs in a long footnote on his penultimate page (p. 130, note 40) that denounces the application of modernity to pre-colonial Africa, the correlated European obsession with tradition in Africa, and then argues that alternative African modernities have to be conceived as products of indigenous agency in reaction to exogenous forces. This dense note promises an interesting essay in itself, but taking the last proposition literally would imply that alternative African modernities could arise on the West African littoral pre-colonially since colonization occurred later in the encounter between Europeans and Africans there than in South Africa. In the historic experience of sub-Saharan Africa, encounters with modernizing exogenous societies did not have to be colonial in character.
- 7 Simon Gikandi’s contribution concerns the “crisis” of post-colonial Africa, but he addresses this crisis via the history of Africa’s position within accounts of modern

reason: this is a history of the “African subject’s difficult location and dislocation in the symbolic economy of European modernity, and the models developed to explain institutions and practices that always seem to be both inside and outside the metaphysics of modern reason” (p. 141). Gikandi goes on to argue both that there is no alternative to thinking about Africa through those modern institutions and ideas imposed by colonial regimes but that, precisely because Africa was already established as one of the others to modernity, this involves an impossibility. The same tension, as Gikendi sees it, still invests an opposition between Achille Mbembe, who sees the “subject’s incapacity for rational reflection” as a liberation from state regulation, and Paulin Hountondji and K. Gyekye who seek resolution of an African crisis through rational self-reflection.

- 8 In one way and another, biased terms of trade in ideas do seem to explain why theories of Euro-American modernity (the diversity of which Wolfgang Knöbl indicates in a concluding chapter) have been more provocative to Africanist ethnography than Africanist ethnography has ever been to theories of modernity. The unreciprocated character of the theorized relationship is part of the problem. Narratives of Euro-American modernity have been modified by recognizing African contributions, but usually in ways that make Euro-American modernity look even more the dominant partner (in a capacity to absorb value through slave modes of production, or through biased terms of trade; or by taking over African aesthetic modes in music and visual arts). The assumption seems to be implicit that cultural materials are subordinated to the logic of the importer when they go “north” but subordinate the culture of the importer in going “south”. Singular or pluralized “African modernities” always invite comparison with the ideals or actualities of European and North American experience. The contributors to this invigorating collection lectured sequentially in Berlin, so they, and their papers, did not have the opportunity to speak to one another. How might they have reacted to those tiresome but necessary questions about the relations between the different contents, places, times and agents of their discussions of modernity that I raised in opening? Is it best to leave modernity as a provocation: a term meaning different things on different occasions and valued for the challenges it poses? Or would we be better advised to try to formalize its variety across its perhaps semi-autonomous instances and occasions? It is a tribute to the interest of the papers individually, and to the editors’ introduction, that one misses this debate keenly.