Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa by Harri Englund: Francis B. Nyamnjoh
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One important challenge confronting Africanist scholarship is the dominance of Euro-American models and paradigms in the analyses of African situations. There has been a persistent failure of liberal scholarship to envisage African predicaments through anything other than analogies drawn from Euro-American experiences. This is why a book that aspires to go beyond dominant Eurocentric paradigms to bring new insights to or understanding of rights and the politics of recognition in Africa would be welcomed by many Africanists as both relevant and timely.

Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa proceeds from conferences on rights and political cultures organized in Zimbabwe and Sweden in 2001. The contributors to this volume aim to adopt an analytic strategy that focuses on African specificity without isolating African realities from global and globalizing political processes. The central theme here is the “politics of recognition” which revolves around identity and is understood as the self-image that individuals and groups have. Grievances of oppression and the lack of recognition addressed through the politics of recognition seek to revise this self-image among both the subjected and the powerful. Such an approach fosters a public space in which debates between dominant and marginal groups can proceed without intimidation. This volume asks what the study of Africa can contribute to the discourse on the politics of recognition, which has been dominated by more familiar examples from Europe and North America.

The contributors to this book use the politics of recognition as an entry point to examining the question of democracy in Africa. They question the liberal insistence on the dichotomy between individuals and society and between citizens and the state. They assess the prospects for alternatives in the politics of recognition particularly in view of the hegemonic role that rights talk has assumed in the continent. More significantly, the editors invite readers to contemplate the ways in which claims for rights and recognition actually draw upon the very ideological foundation they ostensibly challenge.

This book brings some interesting perspectives to the growing body of literature on rights and democratic participation in Africa. One of the more interesting contributions to this volume is Francis Nyamnjoh’s chapter on the rhetoric of rights and competing notions of personhood and agency in Botswana. Nyamnjoh examines the real challenges of achieving liberal democracy in Botswana and calls for forms of democracy more attuned to African realities. The liberal democratic rhetoric of rights, he argues, must listen to, and take on board, creative responses by
Africans informed by their historical antecedents, cultural experiences, and socio-economic circumstances.

The chapter by Fidelis Kanyongolo focuses on the rights discourse in Malawi and asks whether the equality promised in the rhetoric of human rights can be achieved in that country simply by means of legal and constitutional reform without embarking on fundamental structural transformations involving new land tenure regimes and changes in gender relations. Similarly, Krista Johnson and Sean Jacob explore the limited potential of legalism in transforming the profoundly unequal societies of post-colonial Africa. They examine contrasting understandings of rights in post-apartheid South Africa and show the limits of civic freedom in ensuring genuine democratization. Their contribution is significant in one distinct respect. The discourse on rights and the politics of recognition has, for the most part, focused on minority issues but in their study of post-apartheid South Africa, Johnson and Jacob raise the question whether the politics of recognition in some African settings should not be more concerned with the plight of the disadvantaged majority.

Other chapters in this volume offer wide-ranging critical perspectives on the challenges of democracy in Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Eritrea, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon. Ulrik Halsteen analyzes public discussion about multi-party politics in Uganda and the need for unconventional solutions to the protracted armed conflict that has devastated the country. Focusing on Mozambique, Bjorn Bartelsen shows how popular participation in multiparty elections may arise from rather different ideas and aspirations than what is commonly assumed in liberal political theory.

This volume, however, does not always succeed in its declared task of moving the discourse of rights and democratic participation in Africa away from the dominant Euro American framework. For instance, by using terms such as the "politics of recognition" and drawing extensively from the language that dominates the study of contemporary politics in Europe and America, many of the contributors are themselves ultimately constrained the very same analytic limitations they seek to transcend. But then, perhaps such creative borrowing is, after all, inevitable in an increasingly globalizing and interdependent world. The challenge for Africanists is ensuring that such borrowed concepts and analytic frameworks do not in the end obfuscate the original subject matter and compromise the quest for African specificity. It is a challenge that this book tackles quite well.

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