

BOOK REVIEW

Uchenna Okeja. *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022. \$30. Paper. ISBN: 9780253059918.

Part of Review forum on “Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy”

Very few people would need more convincing that Africa’s problem is rooted in political failure. This condition is already bad enough. Equally bad, if not worse, is that African thinkers recycle the same answers to the same enduring problem. Valentine Mudimbe captures the pattern of reproducing the same answer in a powerful metaphor. He compares the situation of the African intellectuals to a person

trapped in an elevator that perpetually goes up and down. In principle, a single gesture would be sufficient to stop the machine, get out, and rent an apartment or room; in sum, live and experience the reality of the world. But apparently, he does not understand that the initiative to escape belongs to him. (Bennetta Jules-Rosette [1991] “Speaking about Hidden Times: The Anthropology of V. Y. Mudimbe,” *Callaloo* 14 (4): 944–60, at 948).

This metaphor aptly expresses Okeja’s concern about African political philosophy in relation to Africa’s political failure. Okeja has identified the practice of conceptual retrieval as one of the central problems plaguing African political thought. Conceptual retrieval is a practice in circular thinking by which thinkers reach back in the past to retrieve old concepts to attend to the challenges of the present. “In their bid to solve the challenge of postcolonial Africa, [African thinkers] retrieved concepts and ideas from the traditional African past without offering a sufficient refashioning of these concepts and ideas” (61). Rather than be stuck in conceptual retrieval, African political thought, Okeja argues, ought to engage in “conceptual creativity,” which, for him, is “the creative fashioning of new modes of self-understanding and engagement with the reality of what it means to be African” (138). Okeja works through what he calls “the phenomenology of the everyday experience of Africans to reflect on the nature of the challenge it represents” (11). He provides ample examples of conceptual creativity with contemporary African music, literature and arts, showing how “to refashion, rethink, and merge the paradigms of Africa’s traditional and modern conceptual resources” (141). In what appears to me as the most important chapter of the book, “Palaver and Consensus—Provenance of a Conceptual Apparatus,” Okeja applies his notion of conceptual creativity to the African

practice of palaver, giving birth to his theory of deliberative agency, arrived at through the analysis of “the phenomenology of public meetings” (84).

Deliberative Agency belongs to the few books on Africa that take Africans seriously as agentic subjects. It is particularly important to me that the book has avoided the otherwise predictable style of postcolonial intellection, which is heavily invested in litigating Europe for Africa’s social and political malaise. It is a well-written book. The arguments are tightly constructed and the many examples help the average reader to get through the otherwise difficult philosophical concepts.

Many readers might want to know the difference between conceptual retrieval and conceptual creativity in relation to lived reality. Does it not all amount to the same shuffling of concepts? What ethical implications does all this entail? Secondly, Okeja rightfully makes reference to Peter Ekeh’s concept of two publics: the primordial public and the civic public. The truth is that nearly every modern African carries within them these two publics—the primordial and the civic—and two allegiances, two moral compasses—the village morality and the modern one. How is public deliberation possible in a geopolitical space habited by people with different loyalties and different “publics?” and who uncritically celebrates them as parts of African renaissance?

Whereas public palaver might have functioned well in the premodern African setting, modern African states bring unique challenges that might disrupt the envisioned feasibility of the practice. To be sure, confronted and probably confounded by the complexity of modernity into which Africa has been swept, the postcolonial African State, such as Cameroon, Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) argues, creates “a world of meanings all of its own, a master code which, in aiming for a primary centrality, also, and perhaps paradoxically, governs the logics of the constitution of all other meanings within these societies.” The State also seeks to institutionalize its own world of meaning and “make that world fully real, turning it into a part of people’s common sense” and imagination (103). How does conceptual creativity help us to understand the arbitrary invention of codes that subject meaning making to whims and thus futile?

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