J. of Modern African Studies, 50, 2 (2012), pp. 357–366

Reviews

Africa: the politics of suffering and smiling by PATRICK CHABAL
London: Zed Books, 2009. Pp. 212, £16·99 (pbk).
doi:10.1017/S0022278X12000080
Africa: unity, sovereignty and sorrow by PIERRE ENGLEBERT
Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009. Pp. 301, $26.50 (pbk).
doi:10.1017/S0022278X12000080

Patrick Chabal's book is a bold synthesis, which attempts to bring together core elements in Africa's post-colonial political development. It is based on what Chabal calls a 'cultural approach' – an 'interpretation of meanings', which aims at explaining how 'specific [African] "modernities" are rooted in their own "traditions"' (86). His focus is on what African societies and polities have in common, rather than on their differences, relations, and conflicts between them.

Chabal's focus is also on an Africa that is separated from its global connections and from the dynamics through which these are developing. Within his framework, it is of interest to compare ethnic and democratic politics in different African countries, but not the ways in which nationalist mobilisation and understandings of citizenship have evolved through interactions with other countries such as India. Chabal's 'Africa' is seen through an area studies approach, which is becoming increasingly limited, and does not take into account the impact of new global and South-South dynamics.

It is now time to question how 'African' the politics of different African societies is when understood in its global setting. Chabal remains committed to an anthropological understanding of political culture as something homogeneous within regional boundaries. In Africa, common understandings of virtue and accountability prevail, which are not 'necessarily best served by multiparty electoral means' – and therefore Western notions of democracy and rationality are not right for the continent (71). This seems to place African countries in a cultural prison of 'African-ness'; instead, it might be more profitable to study instead how political concepts travel – how they are given meaning and thought about in different African situations.

Instead of adapting – as Chabal attempts – 'modernity' and 'tradition' as analytical concepts with which to think in terms of an 'African modernity', we would do better to look at how such notions have been mobilised during political struggles. If we do this, we see 'tradition' deployed in very contradictory ways, which means that it needs to be understood as a contested political field with a plurality of meanings. Similarly, 'modernity' is often raised in multiple ways within local political discourse, including demands for accountability through multiparty democracy. It is often claimed – most commonly by people in power – that 'consensualist' unity government is something particularly suited to African conditions. But this is challenged by democratic opposition

movements which dispute the rightfulness, desirability, and indeed 'Africanness', of consensualism. As a result, whether something is 'African' or not is a matter for political dispute as well as academic debate.

Earlier writing by Patrick Chabal, along with the work of Jackson and Rosberg, Robert Rotberg, William Zartman and Jeffrey Herbst, provides inspiration for Pierre Englebert's book *Africa: unity, sovereignty and sorrow*. The question Englebert seeks to answer is why, in spite 'of all their catastrophic failures, weak African states are still around' (1). There is no question here about the commonality of 'African-ness': 'What is puzzling about Africa is the lack of sanction for failure. How can African states get away with their lousy performance? Why do they endure? How can these oppressive and exploitative, yet otherwise decrepit structures remain broadly unchallenged in their territories or their fundamental existence as states? How can they simultaneously display decay and stability, weakness and resilience?' (3).

In particular, Englebert wonders why secession has been uncommon in Africa. His explanation is that it is international recognition of the sovereignty of African states and their borders that keeps them going. He also explores the 'domestic dimensions of international sovereignty': the 'legal command' that comes with sovereignty carries a form of 'rent' which is typically dispersed through clientelist networks. Englebert argues that, given Africa's 'climate of relative scarcity', 'these rents often dwarf alternative avenues for personal advancement and accumulation' (6). This explains why 'African elites' are more interested in continued state failure and 'shadow transaction' opportunities than in more stable frameworks for economic development that might be provided by governance reform – or through secession.

Because he sees the internal political dynamics of Africa as being corrupt and predatory, Englebert is most concerned with the international politics of recognition that keeps African states in existence and with possible options for reform. The final part of his book is dedicated to three 'policy fantasies', which – if acted out – would 'revoke the unconditional international recognition of Africa's postcolonies and promote the conditions for the rise of domestic sovereignty or empirical statehood in Africa' (10).

The first and most radical of Englebert's 'policy fantasies' involves a 'blanket removal of the recognition of Africa's postcolonial states … For anyone who cares about the emancipation of Africans from the remaining shackles of colonialism, this policy would spell freedom at last. The Berlin conference would be undone; the business of decolonization finished once and for all' (246). The withdrawal of international recognition, according to Englebert, would force African states to seek 'domestic' legitimacy. As an example, he mentions Somaliland, which has developed 'better governance than the majority of African countries' despite not having gained international recognition (*ibid.*). One counter-example would be Puntland, which has not been internationally recognised but has not developed good governance. More importantly, there seems to be something distinctly colonial about this 'fantasy' of a 'blanket' removal of recognition, which would be implemented by Western powers. At times, Englebert's discussion sounds a little like a Clubland discussion in late Victorian Britain on how 'we' can best deal with the African question.

Englebert's second 'policy fantasy' involves the establishment of an international certification system, according to which 'the supply of sovereignty to African states' (250) would be regulated and made conditional upon good governance. Models for doing so might seek inspiration from the European Union application of 'soft power' in Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia, but Englebert has something more radical, if also somewhat vague, in mind: 'if we were to adopt this approach, most existing African states might be derecognized. Botswana, Mauritius, and South Africa would endure, as might a few others that have invested more in their populations than their average counterpart. The likes of Chad, the Central African Republic, the DRC, Nigeria, Somalia, or Sudan would see their sovereignty revoked at once' (254).

His third 'fantasy' is a 'milder option', in which Western donors 'hollow out' the sovereignty of African states by increasingly bypassing central government, and collaborating instead with NGOs or 'subnational entities', thereby forcing a decentralisation of the state (259). At this stage in the argument, Englebert appears to be approaching a point in the analysis at which blanket notions of 'fragile' or 'collapsing' states could be challenged by more interesting ones such as the idea of a 'negotiated' state that arises as a result of a balance between different levels of sovereignty. Reaching such a point might also have led him to the realisation that sweeping generalisations about the African state have ceased to be interesting. But unfortunately it is at this stage in the argument that Englebert's book comes to an end.

PREBEN KAARSHOLM
Roskilde University

Turning Points in African Democracy edited by ABDUL RAUFU MUSTAPHA and LINDSAY WHITFIELD
Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009. Pp. 235, £55·00 (hbk).
doi:10.1017/S0022278X12000092

Despite the fact that democratisation in Africa constitutes the plurality of third wave transitions, there has been little in the way of transitology literature attempting to explain common or divergent patterns of regime change across the continent. Since Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) initial cross-national analysis of protests, political liberalisation, and the aptly named democratic 'experiments' between 1990 and 1994, two decades of political party development, competitive elections and associational evolution provide new data for the particular experience of democracy within each country, and suggest common patterns and interesting variations to shed light upon the study of African politics and comparative democratisation more generally. An updated analysis of regime transitions and quotidian democratic practices is needed in order to assess the diversity of outcomes and variety of trajectories. Enduring questions remain: what does democratisation signify in the African context, and what can it tell us about regime change as a more general phenomenon? How do we explain democracy's seeming durability in some cases and fragility in others?

In this light, the edited volume by Mustapha and Whitfield is a welcome addition to the scholarly and policy discourse. As the foreword by Laurence