differentiation means that those who suffer most from the loss of land and livelihoods are usually not the same people who are most likely to benefit from any new jobs. Where land is allocated for a project but not used, communities can suffer from lost access to land without gaining any benefits at all. This situation leads Cotula to observe that: 'The real "idle land" … is the land that investors take and fail to develop' (p. 142).

Regarding solutions, Cotula argues that increased agricultural investment in Africa is crucial, but a different model is needed – one that foregrounds the desires of rural people in broad development strategies rather than seeking their consent for individual projects. He highlights the potential for legal mechanisms to help shift practice, acknowledging that contradictory interests often impede collective action. Similarly, the diversity of local interests complicates efforts to define the collective aspirations of rural people – although the book describes cases where local resistance, strengthened by alliances, has already achieved some legal victories.

The book provides a concise overview of land grab issues for a wide audience. Its point of view shifts appropriately between broad patterns and case examples, given its scope: it covers many forms of interventions, mediated by different kinds of arrangements, with different outcomes, in ecologically, culturally and socially diverse locales across Africa. The author adequately qualifies the available information, providing disclaimers when it is too early to draw firm conclusions, but still seeking early signals in the evidence collected so far. Cotula resists overstepping what is known to make punchier political statements, yet makes clear the range and seriousness of justice concerns associated with agricultural land deals and the lack of power and protection experienced by those affected most directly.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972015000133

JEAN GODEFROY BIDIMA, *Law and the Public Sphere in Africa:* La Palabre *and other writings*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press (hb $40 – 978 0 253 01124 4). 2013, xl + 198 pp.

Almost half of this book – which is edited by Laura Hengehold of Case Western Reserve University, who also adds a helpful introduction – is comprised of the title paper, which was originally published in French as *La Palabre: une juridiction de la parole* (Paris: Michalon, 1997). In this paper, the full title of which in this translation by Hengehold is '*La Palabre:* the legal authority of speech', Bidima, who holds a chair at Tulane University, New Orleans, considers the African process of conflict reduction through *palabre*, a form of public discussion mediated by one or more third parties. Emphasis is placed on the power of words, the term *palabre* being derived from the Spanish *palabra* and the Portuguese *palavra*, or 'word'. While *palabre* can refer to many types of speech, this work is concerned with agonistic *palabre*, aimed at conflict resolution, rather than irenic *palabre*, used on occasions such as marriage when there is no dispute or conflict. As Bidima states, *palabre* is 'not just an exchange of words, but also a social drama, a procedure, and a series of human interactions'.

As *palabre* brings justice closer to disputing individuals and groups, it exists in powerful contrast to the prosecution or civil lawsuit. These end with an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972015000145 Published online by Cambridge University Press

authoritative decision, in accordance with pre-established rules, for victory, punishment, compensation, or dismissal of the case. *La palabre* aims not to 'discipline and punish' but to 'discuss and redeem', to restore peace rather than to select a winner, so punishment is unlikely and compensation may be symbolic. In the field of political conflict, *palabre* may produce results very different from those of postcolonial democracy. *Palabre* encourages an active form of tolerance, in which each individual experiences a 'little death' of selfhood, and in which social institutions agree to a 'loss of sovereignty'. The possibility exists that either party will accept that they have been in error and change their opinion, whereas the 'passive tolerance' of the West means that each party merely 'leaves alone' the other, prejudices intact.

Bidima's argument is scathing when considering the extent to which African colonial and postcolonial elites have adopted Western legal and religious ways of dealing with conflict. He criticizes postcolonial programmes that have been held up by some as solutions to Africa's social and political problems. The 'reduction of politics to the state,' he argues, 'stifles current African political thought since it prevents us from thinking about the problem of collective life.' But, equally, we cannot rely on religion or ethnicity, traditional powers, practices introduced through colonization, the ideals of one-party systems, nor the ideals followed in the constituent assemblies that introduced multi-party democracy. The same holds true for pan-Africanism, *ujamaa, négritude* and what Bidima refers to as the 'inculturation' of religious doctrines. While *palabre* cannot solve all the problems that these theories have mistakenly claimed to solve, it can contribute significantly to this process.

This is a rich argument, wide-ranging in its scope, and with many nuances and implications. It challenges modern notions of law and government, principally in Africa but also everywhere else. Inevitably the paper raises the question, which it does not consider in detail, of how to devise a programme of action that introduces *palabre* in individual and political disputes to diverse African societies. The examples and discussion give the impression that the French-speaking African countries have moved even further from *palabre* than the anglophone countries. But, for example, although the anglophone judicial systems recognize customary laws, it seems to be impossible for them to adopt the *palabre*-imbricated practices that continue, to limited degrees, outside the purview of the courts. It appears equally impossible to envisage political debate switching to *palabre* procedures, given current and possible future distributions of power and wealth. More fundamentally, it is difficult to envisage a system of *palabre* that avoids all adherence to a normative order. It may be valuable to hold up the ideal of an agonistic *palabre*, but it appears unlikely that African societies and polities might be able to make extensive use of a process in which every possible belief or assumption about the ordering of society and proper individual conduct is open to rejection. Dispute and conflict cannot be discussed between parties without some shared principles.

Of the five other essays, one is entitled 'Strategies for "constructing belief" in the African public sphere: "the colonization of the lifeworld"'. This is a translation by Hengehold of a section of Bidima's *Theorie Critique et Modernité Négro-Africaine: de l'école de Franckfort à la 'Docta Spes Africana'* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1993). The remaining four papers have all been published in English translation subsequent to the title essay, three in the journal *Diogenes* and one in a publication from UNESCO (*The Book: a world transformed*, edited by Eduardo Portella, 2001). All refer to much relevant literature, and add new and different insights to the title paper, although without any explicit reference to *palabre* and with just one reference to the title paper. It would have been helpful

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972015000145 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if this volume had indicated the dates and places of first publication of these five papers.

These essays cast an invigorating light on law, politics, public language and social practice in modern Africa, raising searching questions not only about the heritage of colonialism but about the various postcolonial policies and theories that have aimed to overcome the problems of that heritage.

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VICTORIA BERNAL, *Nation as Network: diaspora, cyberspace, and citizenship*. Chicago IL and London: University of Chicago Press for the International African Institute (hb $75 – 978 0 226 14478 8; pb $25 – 978 0 226 14481 8). 2014, 199 pp.

Nation as Network is an ethnographic foray into the political and cultural influence of digital media on Eritrea as a nation, from the perspective of sovereignty and citizenship, and through the study of selected websites. Bernal's argument is founded on the premise that the internet is not first and foremost a science and technology product; rather, it is a cultural medium – one that is central to the production of social texts and cultural artefacts. Based on this premise, she has two fundamental arguments. Firstly, digital media provide citizens with resources to 'participate in' and 'co-author' the 'narratives that govern their lives', informing their political struggles and extending the boundaries of what is widely regarded as citizenship. The second argument is that, although one may not be able to generalize about whether the impact of digital media in promoting 'nation as network' is strengthening or weakening national sovereignty, it remains clear that 'states continue to remain significant and powerful' even in the midst of 'global flows' and 'transnational connections'.

In this book, Bernal clearly structures her analysis of Eritrean life online along three major poles: namely, politics, media and diaspora. This approach is helpful to the reader because the connections between the three strands in the formation of nation as a network become clearer. Bernal weaves her narrative through Eritrea's tumultuous political history and practices, and through the uptake of the internet (new media) by the diaspora and the contribution to Eritrea's politics through communicative action on websites. This in turn reveals how the dominant understanding of citizenship and sovereignty is being challenged, and even 'reconfigured' and 'reproduced' through the internet. In Bernal's words, the internet is allowing 'the creation of an elastic political space', 'which extends and at the same time exhibits the limits to territorial sovereignty'.

The role of digital media in politics across societies from the global South to the West has been a prominent subject of academic discourse since the increased adoption of digital media tools that led to significant events such as the Arab Spring, Obama's election in the US and the Occupy movements, to mention just a few prominent examples. Many scholars have raised enquiries about the implications of growing access to the internet and digital media generally with regard to (global) politics. Books such as Manuel Castells's *Networks of Outrage and Hope: social movements in the internet age*, James E. Katz *et al.*'s *The Social Media President: Barack Obama and the politics of digital engagement* and others have alternated their focus between the activities of the state and the display of mass action by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972015000145 Published online by Cambridge University Press