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Reviews

Development and Politics from Below: exploring religious spaces in the African state edited by B. Bompani and M. Frahm-Arp
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. 257, £57.50 (hbk).
doi:10.1017/S0022278X11000644

This book is the product of a conference at Edinburgh in 2008 devoted to rethinking the relation between religion, politics and development. The editors' introduction and conclusion raise all sorts of expectations that the volume represents a radical rethinking of the subject matter, but most of the ten essays make a far more modest contribution along the lines suggested by the subtitle: they explore various ways religion functions in public life in Africa today.

Stephen Ellis agues that although the West has seen development in terms of technological economic growth, most Africans have sought to understand their place in the wider scheme of things by reference to invisible worlds. This has not changed, and 'if we seek to know how Africa might develop in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to include religion' (p. 38). Gerrie ter Haar offers an exhortation to mobilise spiritual resources, using as an example the call of the former Archbishop of Lusaka, Emmanuel Milingo, to embrace a holistic development driven by local understandings, self-reliance, sufficiency and 'growth from within'. Abdulkader Tayob describes how public pressure prevented commercial development over Muslim shrines in Cape Town; this seems a fairly straightforward application of 'cultural rights' as defined in South Africa's constitution.

Dorothea Schulz contributes a detailed study of Islamic women's groups in Mali, explaining their origins, aims and the constraints on them. David Skinner compares some Muslim groups in Ghana, Sierra Leone and the Gambia, and documents the resources they attract, but also admits the competition between them can lead to 'destabilising consequences'. However, the chapter reads rather oddly, as if the fieldwork was completed in the 1980s; while many matters are left there, others have been updated from the internet.

Ernest Mallya writes on the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in Tanzania in a rather generalising style: FBOs play 'a big role', do 'a good job', have 'a lot of influence' or 'a substantial say'. Linda van de Kamp writes on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Mozambique, particularly the often exorbitant monetary sacrifices it demands. She relates the readiness of individuals to sacrifice to processes of social transformation, but some readers might regard the role religion plays in this case as simply exploitative. Elizabeth Graveling describes the everyday religious pragmatism of inhabitants in a village of south-west Ghana. Ezra Chitando describes what the World Council of Churches has done regarding the AIDS epidemic in Africa, admitting 'that the prophetic ministry of the church in relation to HIV has not been a spectacular success' (p. 232).

James Cochrane is co-Principal of the African Religious Health Assets Programme (ARHAP). His chapter not only maps some religious initiatives in the area of HIV and AIDS care – the vast majority of which are invisible to official oversight – but speculates on the role of such initiatives in recovering 'the political proper'. Now that the excesses of political power and the market economy threaten to drive out every other consideration, these initiatives carry with them impulses that awaken and potentially mobilise people around what he calls 'lifeworld interests'. These are avenues through which ordinary citizens might enter, with effect, into the public sphere. His complex argument suggests answers for some of the more ambitious questions raised in the editors' introduction and conclusion.

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SOAS

Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa edited by D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne
Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010. Pp. xvi+205, £40.00 (hbk).
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Borderlands have long been among the most dynamic places in the world. Recently, they have also emerged as one of the most dynamic sites of social sciences research. People living in borderlands often show extraordinary creativity in interacting with the 'other side' and in making use of the opportunities generated by differences in state regulations. The border gives some the opportunity to challenge the order of things on their side and to develop new modes of social integration across existing divides; it helps others to strengthen social identity by offering a new, centrally enforced, set of social ascriptions. Borders, in short, may be created to contain agency, but they often end up lending it new scope.

This is the perspective offered by this rich and focused volume on borderlands in the Horn of Africa. Even after many years of research into African borderlands, seeing borders as resources still seems to run against the grain of conventional thinking. Borders, the conventional wisdom claims, are artificial colonial inventions cutting through local polities and containing them into a national straightjacket. They are not resources for local agency, but a hindrance to it. From the preface to the volume, it seems the editors had some problems convincing their contributors of the value of the opposite approach, but in the end they have managed pretty well. The empirically and often conceptually rich contributions to the volume foreground how borderlanders make use of borders, without neglecting the negative impact that state borders can have.

In the introduction, the editors offer a useful literature review and a conceptual framework through which to read the following chapters. They differentiate four types of resources provided by borders, relating to the economy, to politics, to identity and to group rights, and offer a short description of factors they see as crucial in determining whether borders can be used as resources. While neither the typology nor the factors are likely to be the last word on the topic, they represent very useful empirically grounded tools for a comparative analysis of borderlands.