

variables to regress against a dependent variable of governance (there are subsections on this in the book but they do not actually deal with variables), or a quantification of pressures and counter-pressures. The book does not do this and as a result, the balance of forces, the interaction between agencies in pursuit of different agendas, and the ambiguous behaviour of donors or African governments largely boils down to a far more anecdotal analysis within which country case studies are reviewed over specific periods as sequences of events.

The country case studies are clearly and expertly set out. They give a flavour of the pluralised and complex interactions of agencies with a focus on the ways these agencies have promoted or resisted governance reform, especially in regards to elections. I could not see clearly how the hypotheses set out earlier added values to these narratives. The impression one got from the case studies is of contingent political situations, equivocal donor action, and embedded state practices that are harder to change than some expected.

The book is a clearly written and interesting overview of Africa's limited progress in generating strong governance progress in terms of electoral democracy and transparency.

GRAHAM HARRISON
University of Sheffield

Law and the Public Sphere in Africa: La Palabre and Other Writings by JEAN GODEFROY BIDIMA

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014. Pp. 240. £24.99 (hbk)

doi:10.1017/S0022278X14000512

This book addresses the very important question of the constitution of the public sphere from the perspective of *La palabre*. As Bidima makes clear, the task of interrogating the political and legal resources embedded in the practice of *palabre* is made explicit by the paradox that 'the very people who over-emphasized law are returning to practices of informal mediation, while those who spontaneously practiced the latter want to codify everything according to a rigid legal model' (p. 15).

In analysing the public space of *palabre* (Chapter 1), Bidima begins with an exploration of the meaning of the concept. *Palabre*, he says, designates 'not just an exchange of words, but also a social drama, a procedure, and a series of human interactions' (p. 17). Being an act of 'staging' of the word, this form of discourse takes place in a structured space. Its relations to law, the forbidden, the subject, nature and time are tied to its main goal – the restoration of human relationships (p. 21).

Having reconstructed the meaning and use of the concept, Bidima turns to the articulation of a political paradigm (Chapter 2). Here, he attempts to recapture the tactic of collective life inherent in the practice of *palabre* and what it makes possible. Bringing the resources of *palabre* to bear on the internal dimensions of conflict and consensus, Bidima attempts to show its contributions to the quest for solutions to contemporary political problems.

In Chapter 3, we find a thorough analysis of *palabre* as a means of structuring disagreement. Here, Bidima carefully unpacks the 'primary competitors' to

palabre and their metaphysical foundations. By pointing to different forms of repressive consensus which occlude *palabre*, Bidima demonstrates their artificiality and negative effects.

The goal of Chapter 4 is to conceptualise the place of *palabre* within political mechanisms in Africa. Here, *palabre* comes into contact with Pan-Africanism, African Socialisms (*Ujamaa* and *Negritude*) and evangelisation – the discourse and practice of enculturation. In all these instances, the engagement with *palabre* is fraught with a lot of shortcomings. And this leads Bidima to point out their limitations and underscore what *palabre* could have done for them (p. 57).

The other essays in the book deal with various dimensions of the public sphere in Africa. In the first essay ('Rationalities and Legal Processes in Africa'), the focus is on what happens in the encounter of different rationalities. Specifically, Bidima analyses the encounter of different legal rationalities in Africa in order to make sense of the image of the law thereafter. For Bidima, the meeting of rationalities is 'a matter of interrogating socio-politico-religious structures to discover how systems of meaning are built up' (p. 86).

In the next essay ('Strategies for 'Constructing Belief' in the African Public Sphere'), Bidima approaches the analysis of African politics from the 'angle of the imaginary' (p. 89). Here, he investigates the relationship between politics and desire in order to put into perspective different means by which the life-world is colonised in this context.

The next essay on African cultural diversity and the media articulates the underlying notions of 'the bond' and the 'common world'. Bidima's goal here is to present an explanation of how the plurality of media and cultural diversity impact the basis of unity, or, as he puts it, the common world, for Africans.

The essay on 'Books between African Memory and Anticipation' deals with the dwindling faith in knowledge in Africa and the rising investment of this virtue in religion, money and power. Here, Bidima raises questions about non-religious relationship with faith vis-à-vis the intricate relationship between the power that books confer on people and the deployment of this power in the public sphere in Africa.

The last essay takes up the complexities arising from the introduction of the internet in different African spaces. Bidima presents in this essay the perceptions of the power embedded in Western science and technology and the masks of the triumphant model of science offered in Africa (p. 146). In this context, he interrogates the supposed benefits of the internet accruing to Africa in order to make clear their impacts on time, social bond and public space.

After reading the book, one cannot but recall the words of the author regarding whether or not the book is a symphony or cacophony (p. ix). The most important question which would strike anyone reading this book today is the potentials of *palabre* in an era of violent refusal of any dialogue. If we understand *palabre* as a 'staging' of the word and conceive it as a means of structuring conflicts, what becomes of collective life and its foundations (social bond) in the face of the various forms of silent, or even dumb, violence we are experiencing today in the name of terrorism? In fairness to Bidima, however, *palabre* cannot be called upon to provide solutions to all of Africa's problems. This notwithstanding, it still seems there is something unique embedded in

palabre that makes it a good candidate for this sort of endeavour, especially when examined in the context of the constitution of the public sphere.

To conclude, it is pertinent to underscore that Bidima's study broadens our understanding of the public sphere due to his originality and capacity to synthesise different strands of thought. This notwithstanding, the reader is still left in the end with questions about the relationship of theory and praxis. Since *palabre* is a non-violent means of structuring conflicts, how should we conceive its application in contemporary international politics that is challenged by silent/ non-dialogical violence? How is the practice of *palabre* possible where people do not share the same initial presupposition – that violence or conflicts can be structured through a 'staging' of the word? In all, it must be conceded that Bidima has done a very important work here which deserves the critical attention of philosophers, political theorists, legal scholars as well the general public.

UCHENNA OKEJA
Goethe University

Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century edited by EBENEZER OBADARE and WENDY WILLEMS

Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014. Pp. 236. £45 (hbk)

doi:10.1017/S0022278X14000524

This is an excellent collection, well-edited and, without exception, well-written. The premises and themes of the collection are simple but radical: that African civil society and civil subjects are not replicas of Western models, but embody their own histories and social conditions; and that the African sub-altern speaks, but in a variety of interesting, novel, and entertaining ways. Humour and innovation, informality and creativity become key motifs in this book.

Having said that, the book then becomes a 'sampler' of different forms of civil expression and civic agency. What is privileged is expression and agency from below, but comedy, satire and music stand out as examples. To this extent, the collection follows well-worn tracks, e.g. Fela Kuti in Nigeria, Malian music (which of all African musics is probably the most embedded in the 'world music' scene), and the cartoons of Zapiro in South Africa.

But music requires a production base – recording studios and the like – and political cartoons requires newspapers, whether printed or web. Those 'below' need access to technology. Although talk-back radio is discussed (in Mali), it is this aspect of civil agency which is under-written in this collection: the technological mastery and access to technology by the under-privileged. Even the brief account of the North African 'Arab Spring' fails to delve deeply into social media or citizen reporting on smartphones. But, in the access to technology, the smartphone has proved the great leveller and democratiser, as both access to late-capitalism (in the form of money transfers) and expression and protest (in viral messaging and images) become possible.

The fault of the collection is simultaneously its richness. Its examples of civic action are all rich, but they are also for the most part set-pieces which can be studied as set-pieces. The fluidity of late-modernity, or a form of African post-modernity, is not fully captured here.