

RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION IN AFRICA, BY
ENGLUND, HARRI, & NYAMNJOH, FRANCIS B. EDS.,

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A Review by Mohammad Hossein Seifikar

This book explores the politics of recognition in post-colonial Africa. It also deals with the various ways Africa is dealing with democratization and the claims for rights. The politics of recognition refers to the grievances which minorities bring up in the public realm concerning lack of recognition or misrecognition. The contributors in this volume demonstrate that the contemporary African politics are immersed in the politics of recognition no less than are the politics of Europe and the United States. They present a number of case studies from a wide range of Sub-Saharan countries which show that currently there is a torrent of identity politics in the African public sphere, with demands for ethnic and regional representation. The early post-colonial African leaders suppressed difference in the name of national unity. The politics of recognition in post-authoritarian Africa aims to rectify this situation.

The contributors often use the politics of recognition as an entry point to confronting what forms of liberal democracy are best suited to Africa. They claim that currently the popular African demands for ethnic and regional recognition and representation are expressed in terms of rights and democracy. They argue against one-size-fits-all conception of liberal democracy and try to form local alternatives to it. Some of the chapters in this volume critically examine the liberal insistence on a dichotomy between individual and society, citizens and state.

What sort of liberal democracy and conception of rights is best for African nations? The chapters in this book argue that the answer to this question always depends on the local and specific empirical realities on the ground, such as, the economy, the political situation, the way people relate to each other, and even the way the people perceive the world and their own sense of

self. The contributors argue that democracy will only thrive if we take into consideration and understand historical particularities and not by imposing ‘difference-blind’ models which do not correspond with local realities.

The essays in this volume are arranged into three parts. The first part is called ‘The Rhetoric of Rights.’ It includes essays by Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Fidelis Edge Kanyongolo, Krista Johnson & Sean Jacobs, and Ulrik Halsteen. They describe and assess the various intermediate communities and loyalties which can exist between the individual and the state. They also argue that the rhetoric of rights (particularly social and economical rights) do not match the difficulties many people have in securing and exercising them because they are too poor and powerless. The authors are concerned that in some contexts rights talk may be more rhetorical than a means of emancipation. The essays discuss these ideas and develop them in the contexts of the democracies of Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, and Uganda.

The second part is called ‘Disadvantage, Misrecognition, Subjection.’ It includes essays by Marianne Andersen, Sheila Bunwaree, and Bjorn Enge Bertelsen. These essays seek to uncover the politics of recognition and representation in Kenya, Mauritius, and Mozambique. They focus on the way the official rhetoric of ideologies of democracy repress group identities not following the existing subject categories. The authors look closely at the claims and attempts of the Kenyan Deaf community to be recognized as a cultural and linguistic minority, the marginalization of the Creoles women of Mauritius, and the way memory and cosmological dimensions pose a challenge to liberal politics for the Honde community of central Mozambique.

The third part is called ‘Elites and Communities.’ It includes articles by Sten Hagberg, Redie Bereketeab, Peter Geschiere and an Epilogue by Richard Werbner. The essays discuss the roles voluntary associations play in the politics of belonging and in the process of transforming identities into rights in Burkina Faso, the way identity claims can clash with the project of nation building and state formation in Eritrea, and the way the new forest law in Cameroon can intensify the issues of group identity, promote worrying forms of exclusion and xenophobia, and weaken national citizenship. Finally, the Epilogue goes over some the aims of the book and some of the re-occurring issues from the previous chapters.

Overall, I think that this book is a good contribution to understanding the politics of recognition. The essays in this volume manage to generate new

insights into a whole range of issues related to liberal democratic theory, such as, citizenship, civil society, civil rights, and ultimately, personhood and subjectivity. What makes this volume very unique is that the essays are marked by a plurality of analytic approaches to their subjects and they often present some very diverse perspectives on the issues they are dealing with.

I found that many of the essays succeed in opening up new perspectives on Africa's democratization and that they show much flexibility in imagining the institutional forms that democracy may take in Africa. This volume is bound to contribute to the debates and discussions surrounding the alternative forms liberal democracies can take.

