

BOOK REVIEW

Liquidation or Consolidation of Indigenous Technology: A Study of the Changing Conditions of Production of Village Blacksmiths in Tanzania. Jens Müller. Aalborg, Denmark: Aalborg University Press, 1980. 215 pp. SKR 44.

While Müller's book is primarily a case study of the Utundu program for village blacksmith promotion in Tanzania, the work could have important implications for the promotion of rural crafts in other Third World countries. Müller states that his study is "first and foremost" an empirical one "supported by facts and figures relating to the 'surfaces' of the Tanzanian reality" (p. 4). However, it soon becomes apparent that the author is equally determined to lend insight into the theoretical and historical outlooks which shaped that reality. Thus, the book represents an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice in Third World countries--a gap which, on the one hand, leads the theorists (in the state ruling class) to label the peasant population as "backward, lazy or crazy" and, on the other hand, causes the practitioners (the peasant class) to label as suspect and unfeasible the policies emanating from government planning commissions.

While Müller's empirical data are highly speculative and sometimes intuitive conjectures, he uses them, nonetheless, as a springboard from which to leap into a pragmatic analysis of the feasibility of revitalizing the two-thousand-year-old indigenous blacksmith "industry" in Tanzania. At the same time, the author makes no pretense that his figures and data are otherwise than rough estimates of a hard-to-document* phenomenon in Tanzania; rather they are presented to enable the novice or inexperienced rural extension worker to form an idea of the approximate size and scale of the indigenous blacksmith industry in Tanzania.

No stranger to Tanzanian politics and development policies, in the early '70s Müller made extensive survey trips in the country while working on the five-year development plan for the West Lake region; he later collaborated with the Small Industries Development Organization (SIDO) and surveyed the Tanzanian blacksmith situation on a nation-wide scale. The highly speculative nature of Müller's empirical data is offset by his insightful depiction of the total production process in Tanzania. He is critical of planners who have jumped unthinkingly on the

* Müller reiterates the fact that the peasants are oftentimes reluctant to trust or take into their confidence any official-type agent of the government.

appropriate technology bandwagon: "...by a closer look we find that practically none of the thus labelled 'appropriate' projects are feasible projects" (p. 203) since the "conditions of application" remain unchanged and "by and large [are] already fully exploited by the present producers" (p. 204). Moreover, Müller asserts that whereas the former colonial administration did its best to retard the evolution of the blacksmith industry in Tanzania by relying solely on imported iron and metal works (and those included, of course, guns), the post-independence administration has done little or nothing to revitalize or to even recognize the art and skill (and the future potential) of those African blacksmiths who, although working clandestinely for years, have passed on their craft and skills to roughly 10,000 smiths today. Müller suggests that there may exist an unconscious fear at government levels that the smiths just might one day produce guns if the materials were readily available.

The author further believes that the present administration is too preoccupied with the bourgeois notion of modernity and standardization. He cites an "extreme" case where SIDO and the Ubungo Farm Implement Factory (UFI) were asked to assist a group of smiths to market a stock of 2,000 axes, each differing minutely from the next in the way that all handmade articles are unique. Since government officials felt that it wasn't possible to fix 2,000 different prices, the project was scrapped (no pun intended). While the author grants that this is an "extreme case," he uses it to point out that this same attitude toward standardization is pervasive in Tanzania, from small cooperative shops to the larger retail dealerships: "They insisted to sell only 'modern' products" (p. 132).

In sum, Müller's report is pragmatic and highly sympathetic to the plight of the Tanzanian blacksmiths to whom he dedicates the book and whom, Müller is confident, could evolve technological development themselves if only the state class would agree to an improvement in the general conditions of production process from start to finish. If not, Müller predicts, the "present process of liquidation of the village blacksmiths is thus likely to continue" (p. 193). Müller's argument is not so much interesting and thought provoking as it is pragmatic and convincing. The reader should not let the somewhat average English translation --many of the sentences are lengthy and awkward--detract from the essential insights which Müller brings to light.

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