

## **Book Reviews**



Lauren Maclean, *Informal Institutions and Citizenship in Rural Africa: Risk and Reciprocity in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). pp. 312.

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In exploring rural Africa's informal institutions and citizenship dynamics in rural Africa based on a survey of four Akan villages situated on the borders of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire: Brong-Ahafo, Ghana and Abengourou, Cote d'Ivoire, Lauren Maclean uncovers the divergent patterns of informal institutions and citizenship which have been products of political history spanning across three main periods: the precolonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. First, the pre-colonial relates to a period when these villages had very similar political and cultural institutions. Second, the colonial covers pre-British and pre-French colonialism in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. Third, the post-colonial captures the aftermath effects of the colonial on the precolonial and the resultant divergences in the informal institutions and citizenship. Maclean shows how the process of state formation (re)-constructed informal institutions in the villages. The author defines 'informal institutions' as norms of reciprocity, "ways the village residents exchanged help and social support with their nuclear and extended family, clan, friends, neighbors, ethnic group, or others."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, she articulates 'citizenship' as the conceptualizations of duties and rights. Patterns of informal institutions and citizenship are discovered to be different in the villages. While Ghanaians extended their norms of reciprocity to "a much wider array of social ties, particularly friends,"<sup>2</sup> the Ivorian were limited, "particularly members of the immediate nuclear family."<sup>3</sup>

Structurally, the book is segmented into three main parts, which epitomizes stages in the development of informal institutions and citizenship. The first part focuses on Ghanaian and Ivorian villages, their identical cultural landscapes and divergences in norms of reciprocity. This reveals the process of transformation in the informal institutions in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. Part two discusses how divergent histories of state formation in risk mediation have provoked noticeable variations in the informal institutions, while the last section explores the reverberating effects of variation in informal institutions of reciprocity on the indigenous conceptualizations of rights, duties, and political participation.

Essentially, Maclean challenges long-standing assumptions of a homogenous political culture across Africa by discovering phenomenal divergences in the political cultures among the villages and the idea of the development of informal institutions based on weak formal political institutions in Africa. The author argues, on the contrary, that the development of informal institutions was influenced by the state. Previous studies often focus on the historical development of formal state institutions, including the role of constitutional and electoral rules at the macro level, but Maclean makes a significant contribution by focusing on the role of informal institutions, including the norms of social reciprocity at the micro level.

Maclean's methodology deploys a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, through which she compares two similar, border regions. This is most significantly expedient to comprehend the complex processes of social, economic and political transformations that have taken place in these villages over the past 100 years.

However, Maclean overgeneralizes the idea of "rural Africa" which is indicated in the book's title, while most of what is done in the study, predominately field work, concentrates only on four villages and two countries. To what extent can this be generalized to other regions? Since the author's field research is only carried out within some areas, different outcomes are not unexpected in other African regions. Moreover, while the influence of state formation on the development of informal institutions in the villages may not be denied, this however may not be the only factor responsible for the construction of informal institutions, including norms of reciprocity. In the late 1990's, around the time of the research work, there was economic boom in Ghana and social crisis in Cote d'Ivoire which may have also stimulated the variation in social service delivery and norms of reciprocity in both villages. Ultimately, the author's methodology and arguments against previous assumptions provide insightful contributions to the study of rural Africa.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Maclean, *Informal Institutions and Citizenship in Rural Africa: Risk and Reciprocity in Ghana and Cote* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*