

Book Reviews

Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (ed.), *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development*. (West Point, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997). pp. 221

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Since the decolonization of Africa, the continent has continued to be fraught with a wide array of socioeconomic and political travails, including political instability, environmental degradations, economic quagmires, and lopsided gender relations. These problems have only made the quest for Africa's growth and development a daunting task, with a bleak future for the continent. From a Western perspective, Eurocentric scholars have often opined that Africa's development is certainly tied to democratization of the continent, as anything short of strengthening existing Western democratic structures would amount to more chaos for the continent. Hence, the question of Western democracy and its linkage to Africa's development has gained currency among Africanist scholars. In an attempt to unravel the nexus between democracy and development vis-à-vis Africa's misfortunes, Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (ed.) compiled an anthology that bears in-depth analyses of scholars versed in African post-coloniality. The primacy of *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development* sits at the intersection of democratic transition, economic reforms agenda, development management, gender relations, and environmental strategies, with the aim of addressing some of these problems Africa faces through an epistemological approach.

On a technical level, what Larry Diamond did with the first chapter is quite fascinating. Diamond skillfully examined the importance of civic society organization in the growth, development, and sustainability of democratic culture, using the South Africa scenario in particular and Africa in general to show that for democracy to thrive, civic society groups must attain a status of independence, tolerance, and pluralism. Pushing the argument further, E. R. MacMahon reiterated the fact that if democracy – a vital ingredient for Africa's development – must become a practical reality, civil society must be allowed to be “self-renewing.” In other words, that there is the need for civil society to be independent of state governments' resources in order to be neutral in discharging their primary roles”¹ because “civil activism

helped initiate change.”² More so, a critical examination into how decentralization of political power could be a panacea to averting conflict in a multiethnic state became the focal point of discourse, specifically in Angola, which had suffered issues of bipolarity. Another crucial point of the book had to do with the interplay between the struggle to establish democratic structures and the avoidance of Western economic entrapments (e.g., structural adjustment programs) for a continent that has been steeped in a multiple sociopolitical, economic, and security quagmires, such as were seen in Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Botswana, and others.

Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s concerns itself with lingering issues associated with how development management has either made or marred Africa since the 1960s. One point that remains debatable is the premise put forth by one of the authors that because of the lackadaisical attitudes of most African leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) eventually became more favorable agents to drive and manage socioeconomic ideas and funding as provided by Western donors. Moreover, in order to live up to expectations, “African NGOs increasingly have moved to organize themselves into a federation...through which they liaise and negotiate with government agents, share resources and ideas, and coordinate their development activities.”³ That notwithstanding, the question as to whether Africa has benefited from the connections between Western donors and NGOs have yielded much result is not yet established, given the fact that African states continue to confront a plethora of socio-economic and political challenges. One of the most troubling concerns for Africa’s growth and development as portrayed by Sandra Maclean⁴ is the irreconcilable triad between Western concepts of development, democratization, and the imposed structural adjustment programs. It would appear that strategizing Africa’s growth and development on the parameters of Western structures have only left African states further impoverished. For instance, “in World Bank terminology, [Democratic] governance is ‘the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social forces [*sic*] for development.’”⁵ Going by that quotation, the World Bank expects that political institutions in Africa must align themselves to Western democratic models and that anything contrary to that is tantamount to rebellion and a threat to global economic and political stability.

The book also explores the gender question in the development plans of Africa, reiterating the truism that neglecting women in the process of development management could spell doom for the continent. In fact, the undermining of women's role in the growth and development of the African continent has not changed much, as is espoused in *Gender, Culture and Development in Africa*,⁶ an anthology that has over fifty chapters contextualizing the nexus between gender, cultural practices, and the African development question. The most important question raised is the outright domination by men of most socioeconomic, political, and legal structures, which invariably emanate from sociocultural practices and are strengthened further by colonial policies, and ultimately contravenes regional, continental, and global conventions promoting women's rights. Using a historical analysis of Nigeria, Mary J. Osirim argues that women have constantly had to battle with inequalities on many fronts. The arrival of colonial rule only exacerbated their precarious conditions. However, in spite of the many unfavorable realities on the ground, African women have ceaselessly employed indigenous means to confront such socioeconomic challenges, most especially during the period of structural adjustment programs, when most government policies intended to alleviate their suffering only benefited some women in the elite class. Importantly, the last two chapters of *Subsaharan African in the 1990* prove quite germane in contextualizing the Africa's struggle for development as they both show how environmental concerns, among other variables, have gradually yet persistently formed a clog in Africa's quest for development.

Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s remains one of the best articulated anthologies that critically appraises Africa's progress toward development via gender, economic, political, and environmental perspectives. Such a multidisciplinary approach strengthens the text and parallels the multifaceted nature of Africa's development challenges. In contrast, a majority of the chapters over-advocate for gender equality rather than gender equity. This is even when events across Africa have shown that not all state of equality guarantees fairness and justice as evident in the gender skewness manifesting across African countries – such as Nigeria, Niger, Chad, among others – with the exception of Ethiopia and Rwanda, which since the turn of the 21st century have recorded massive increase in the feminization of their socio-political structures.

Again, *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s*, a text that is expected to give insights on development and democracy, provides no lucid conceptualization of the term “development.” An omission of this nature could make it quite difficult for readers to understand whether the book sees development from the lens of the Marxist-Leninist or that of liberal-capitalist. Nevertheless, based on most of the authors’ analyses, one can surmise that the text employs the capitalist approach to the understanding of development, which is in sharp contrast to that of the Marxist-Leninist model.

Despite its limitations, which are born out of its concentration on democratic values, *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s* remains an important anthology and is highly rated for a proper understanding of post-colonial studies among African scholars. Well-researched and substantiated within a rich bibliographical framework, *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s* illustrates Africa’s travails towards democratization and the many hurdles associated with that struggle.

Notes

¹ Edward R. MacMahon, “The “New” Civil Society and Democratic Transitions in Africa,” In Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (ed.) *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development*, (West Point, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ Peter Koehn and Olatunde Ojo, “Nongovernmental Organizations and Government-Organized Nongovernmental Organizations: Opportunities for Development Management in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” In Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (ed.) *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development*, (West Point, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 118.

⁴ Sandra Maclean, ““Managing” Development in Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: States, Markets, and Alternative Paradigms,” In Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (ed.) *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development*, (West Point, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 129-141.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶ Mobolanle Egunoluwa Sotunso & Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso (eds.), *Gender, Culture and Development in Africa*, (Austin: Pan-African University Press, 2018), xxxii +651.