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Steve McGiffen

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## Book Review

**African Postcolonial Modernity: Informal Subjectivities and the Democratic Consensus** by Sanya Osha (2014, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 262 pp.) ISBN: 978-1-137-44692-3)

**Review by Steve McGiffen**  
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Sanya Osha's desire to encapsulate the diversity of Africa's peoples, their problems and the possible approaches to those problems, makes this collection of essays on a wide variety of topics a stimulating and informative book, but one which is difficult to review. The author himself noted in a personal email to this reviewer that "Africa is a problematic subject thematically. It is too big, heterogeneous and contentious to enable a unifying theme in the realm of politics, history and culture". Instead, he said, he "wanted to project a sense of this heterogeneity and peculiar variety regarding the African condition." This of course could be said of every continent, but a number of features emphasise the special difficulties of dealing with Africa as a unified subject for study.

Firstly, there is the need to resist the tendency of Western media and even Western scholars (of whom I am one) to write about this continent of well over a billion people and something over fifty states (the precise figure is controversial) as if it were a unified whole. Or perhaps, as North Africa is often scarcely recognised as 'Africa', two unified wholes. To take an illustrative example, any violent incident involving a large number of people tends to provoke media alarm that we are heading for 'another Rwanda', whereas similar occurrences in western Europe would hardly have the press reaching for the 'Another Yugoslavia?' headline.

Secondly, while it would be fatuous to treat Europe as a unified whole, attempts to force it into the mould of one by the obsessively neoliberal, one-size-fits-all European Union mean that the same institutions and the same individuals – in Brussels, in Frankfurt – are provoking very similar problems in very different countries across the continent. Of course, one could argue that a similar process is occurring in Africa and elsewhere as a result of the neoliberal drive of the IMF and its sister institutions, but the greater, more direct power of the EU and its accompanying arrogance make the process in Europe more starkly obvious to more people.

Thirdly, there is the fact that other continents have dominant economic powers within them or nearby – China in East Asia, the US in North America, Brazil in South America, India in South Asia, Russia in Central Asia – while this is less true of Africa, despite the size and relative wealth of South Africa and Nigeria. So how to treat Africa in any coherent fashion?

Firstly, Osha, a Nigerian who teaches at a South African university, deals almost exclusively with sub-Saharan Africa. Despite my earlier aside about scarcely recognising North Africa as part of 'Africa', this seems reasonable. And not only does the author avoid being tainted by any tendency to treat 'Black Africa' as any kind of unit, he goes out of his way, as I indicated at the beginning of this

review, to stress its diversity. The impressive breadth of his scholarship enables him to tackle this diversity expertly.

Secondly, having said that, Osha does identify a unifying phenomenon in the history of the societies and cultures which he subjects to the scrutiny of his scholarship. The peoples of each of the countries included in one form or another in the book's eight chapters lived for a century or more under the yoke of colonialism. Each was touched, directly or less directly, by slavery, and by slave-trading. And each had imposed upon it forms of social organisation to which racism and stratification on racial grounds were central.

The book includes major sections on South Africa and Nigeria, which is unsurprising given that these are not only Sub-Saharan Africa's major powers, but also the two which Osha clearly knows best. Many other countries are mentioned *passim*, and some - Zimbabwe, for example - rather more extensively than that, but these are where the focus tends to lie.

The eight chapters together cover a wide and diverse range of aspects of the issues raised by Africa. In Chapter 1, "The Polis: From Greece to an African Athens", Osha begins to explore the relationship of the nation-state to its citizens (as one might say, 'downwards'), and to external forces, ('upwards'), either abstract ('globalisation') or concrete formulations of that term in the form of corporate power, NGOs, IGOs, or other non-state or supra-state institutions. Osha's base argument is not unfamiliar:

As the powers of the traditional nation-state diminish, non-state formations and actors are amassing instruments and mechanisms of coercion...the redefinition of what Arjun Appadurai terms the "horizon of politics" is evident.

Cultural anthropologist Appadurai, who has written extensively on globalisation, its nature and definition, draws attention to an 'explosive growth' of NGOs since World War 2, and Osha shares his concerns regarding the implications of this for democracy. A Gramscian view would, of course, be that NGOs and other 'civil society' groups, form part of the state, though they may also provide a terrain of struggle. This can be expressed in a variety of ways, but Osha's remark that "the expectations of the generality of South Africans about the state and what it provides (in terms of service delivery) are antithetical to the demands of the new regime of global capital" provides a context for the discussion which would be appropriate not only to South Africa but well beyond, to the rest of Africa and the developing world, and even to wealthy, developed countries where the state, though starting from a higher base, is being forced back.

In Africa, whether examining the state or allegedly non-state or supra-state institutions, there is invariably another aspect of the context of struggle, as one is never far from the question of 'race', and the dichotomy which colonialism imposed on the continent has conditioned African politics since the inception of colonialism and continues to do so. While this is hardly unique to the continent, it is not always everywhere quite such a dominant pressure. Almost always an aspect of the context on a global level, it is the primary context within which African individuals and societies confront globalization, as they must confront so much else. In some ways the problem of democracy, like that of the withering state, is no different from the way it is posed elsewhere in the world. It is, however, hard to circumnavigate the rocks of post-colonial racial subordination within which such forms of democracy that exist have perforce developed. On the other hand, African societies may have features which

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101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: [www.ags.edu](http://www.ags.edu) (Please cite this paper as the following: Steve McGiffen. (2015). Book Review: African Postcolonial Modernity: Informal Subjectivities and the Democratic Consensus by Sanya Osha. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies, Volume 1*. Available from: <http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/vol1/iss1/13>)

enable them to develop new forms of democracy which may eventually prove more appropriate than those born in Athens, or those for which the bourgeoisie and labouring people periodically fought in Europe's series of revolutionary and reformist struggles. We shall see,

As Osha points out early in his next chapter, "The Order/Other of Political Culture", democracy is usually understood and employed as a technical concept. Osha sees the need to "broaden the notion of the political", whereas throughout the world it is being narrowed by neoliberal managerialism and the concept of the 'technocratic government'. "What official discourse regards as the political is usually not a complete version of things", Osha notes, curiously echoing Mandela's musings in his autobiographical *Long Walk to Freedom*, but also the theoretical and pragmatic observations of the bulk of those involved in the global struggle against the neoliberal hegemony. Osha means something rather broader than this, and whether deliberately or inadvertently draws attention to the dangers of economism, noting that "we now have to contend with forces that are cultural, diasporic, nonterritorial and bureaucratic that not only expand our understanding of the political but are also decisive in shaping the allegiances and subjectivities of the subject."

It is sometimes surprising how much of what Osha has to say about his own continent is just as applicable elsewhere. Another example is when he notes that "political elites employ the façade of constitutionalism as a means of entrenching socio-political inequalities thereby further distancing themselves from regulations of political accountability." This is a comment on Nigeria, but it would hardly be taking it out of context to apply it to the current process of neoliberal European unification. At least in the less dangerous (for the moment) political milieu of Europe, however, we have the opportunity to debate these issues more-or-less openly, within or outside the academy, and even to try to turn the tables on those who operate the current hegemony. Osha observes that in Nigeria democracy "becomes a concept without precise historical and cultural linkages... which draw its political force from an unproblematized understanding of the discourse of universal human rights." This is harder to pull off in Europe, but this doesn't prevent the ruling elite from trying. To the European Commission, democracy = parliamentary institutions + universal suffrage + basic human rights, an equation which applies both in Europe and beyond. The degree to which institutions have any real power appears not to concern them, still less whether the exercise of a human right, such as freedom of expression or freedom of assembly, has any effect on the powerful, whether any effective instruments exist to enable that. This may seem remote to the survival concerns of the Nigerian democratic and/or left activist, but in reality it is central to the global struggle of which she forms a vital part.

The book covers a myriad other subjects, leaving the reviewer little choice but to give either an unsatisfactorily brief summary, or write about where his or her knowledge and interest overlaps with that of the author. These are so broad that any social scientist or humanities scholar is certain to find something within the pages of this book to stimulate further interest. In my case, the overlap is very much to do with 'democracy', as defined, usurped, employed as a term and degraded, whether in Europe or Africa. Democratic institutions, as Osha notes, "cannot be transferred. Rather, they emerge from organic socio-political struggle." Where they do not do so, they fail to fill the empty signifier "democracy" with any meaning which might reasonably be associated with the term. The first thing that should alert one to the essential falsehood of the European Union's democracy, for example, is that no-one has ever demonstrated for representation at that level, for a European Parliament, for instance. The fact that people have struggled so bravely and visibly in South Africa and Nigeria to

give meaning to the term, gives hope. On the other hand, the fact that, as Osha also observes, it is “in unhealthy societies a recipes for tyranny, criminality and irresponsibility” presents those of us who cannot see justice in any system which does not at least attempt to define democracy and then live by that definition with emotional, practical and theoretical difficulties.

Whenever, in this review, I attempt to capture the breadth and scope of this book I find myself led back to these democracy-related issues, so for the benefit of scholars with other concerns I will simply try to mention some of the other matters which the author covers. There is the development of Africa’s urbans societies, their cultures, structures of power and governance, and landscapes; petty entrepreneurship and its relationship to structures of power; poverty, of course, and how people survive it; related to those survival strategies, both African ingenuity and African criminality; the various ways in which religion, in particular Islam, relates to these phenomena; and overarching everything, the neoliberals with their structural adjustment programs, the IMF and other institutions of imperialism-colonialism ‘by committee’.

The question of the African city, while it raises this whole range of concerns, also demonstrates in stark terms one basic economic problem which again unites this diverse continent. I have the *longue durée* historian’s tendency to seek to make connections between different phases of history in different parts of the globe. My own native region, Lancashire, was plundered by the English elite from at least the sixteenth century onwards and the people’s land stolen in the enclosure movement, which was in some ways analogous to colonialism. Eventually, though, industrialisation, however brutal, created new sources of survival and even, in the end, a limited prosperity for the region’s working people. Africa, however, while it has also been subject to plunder in still more brutal forms, but has seen its economic development distorted to prevent the development of what might become sources of widespread relative prosperity. That is at least one reason why the continent experiences so many periodic surges in migration to Europe. Europe is Africa’s Manchester, and the cities which Osha describes show no sign of picking up that role.

Enough. I have tried to cover as many aspects of this splendid book as I can. Instead of one historian-turned-international relations scholar, it would have been good to have a team of people from different disciplines. I have done my best. You will have to read the book and do the rest for yourselves.

*Steve McGiffen is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the American Graduate School in Paris. He has a PhD in US political history, a subject he has taught at the University of Manchester, England and the UK’s Open University. From 1986 to 1999 he was political assistant to a Member of the European Parliament, after which he joined the secretariat of the European Parliament’s United Left Group, representing the Socialist Party of the Netherlands, for whom he continues to work as a translator and occasional consultant. His books include Globalisation (2002), The European Union: A Critical Guide (2005), Biotechnology: Corporate Power vs the People’s Interest (2006), Poisoned Spring: The European Union and Water Privatisation (2009, with Kartika Liotard), and a historical novel, Tennant’s Rock (2001). His most recent publication is “European Neighbourhood Policy: Path to Democracy or Road to Co-option? Dynamic versus Passive Revolution in the Arab Spring” in Osha, S (ed) The Social Contract in Africa (Pretoria, Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014)*