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Author:

Bettina Engels – University of Bayreuth, Germany

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University of Hradec Králové
Philosophical Faculty

REVIEWS

Georg Klute & Peter Skalník (eds). 2013. *Actors in Contemporary African Politics*. Münster: Lit.

What are political actors? Which actors are relevant in contemporary politics in Africa? And how do they relate to social structures and relations on different scales (local, national, global)? These questions are dealt with in eight chapters, all based on comprehensive empirical research, mostly from the field of political anthropology. Three contributions cover Nigeria: the *Freedom of Information Act* (Jennifer Obado-Joel), the Diaspora as a political actor (Nengak Daniel Gondyi), and the “*First Ladies*” (Linn Asplund). Julius Lambi analyses the success strategies of civil society organisations in North Western Cameroon. Olga Veselovskaya’s contribution is on the Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal. The last two chapters are concerned with Ghana. Stephen Atalebe and Veronika Kurthanová investigate the underlying structures of Ghanaian (party) politics: how can people’s support for certain political leaders be explained? As opposed to how African politics is frequently presented, people do not opt for political leaders primarily due to ethnic loyalty; in Ghana, it is rather regionalism which plays a decisive role. Peter Skalník’s analysis, in his contribution, is also based on empirical research in Ghana. Skalník likewise warns against easily assuming ethnicity as the dominant category structuring Africa politics. Rather than as ethnic, contemporary conflicts in Northern Ghana are better understood as socio-political, he argues. These conflicts are rooted in struggles over the access to land, and over authority, in particular over chieftaincy.

Georg Klute, in his chapter, introduces the concept of heterarchy. In contrast to dominant hierarchical conceptualisations, heterarchy analyses political authority as the complex figurations of state and non-state actors, and flat and overlapping social orders. The idea is illustrated with Klute’s encompassing research on Northern Mali. His reflections start from criticizing the construction of “ungoverned spaces”, “areas of limited statehood”, “state failure”, and the like, that are prevalent in media, political, and academic discourses on Africa. What was presented as “ungoverned”, Klute argues, might be governed in a way external

observers are not able to deal with, or that do not fit to their normative ideas of liberal, representative democracy and the Weberian concept of national states. In contrast, Klute changes the perspective by asking: “What do African developments tell us about evolutions in other parts of the world?” (p. 2)

All chapters question deeply the premature and superficial assumptions on African politics: the dualism of “traditional” and “modern” authority (for instance, “traditional chiefs” opposed to “modern” state authority), the idea of African statehood as “deficient” or “weak”, ethnicity as the overlaying structural category, and others. Opposed to this, the volume demonstrates that political agency is not restricted to parties, politicians, and other formal actors. Most chapters point at citizenship, belonging, and participation as central issues around which political conflict emerges. Obviously, this applies for all world regions similarly. Though the book is dedicated to “*Actors in Contemporary African Politics*”, it provides comprehensive empirical evidence to argue against the idea of Africa being “somehow different”. At the end of the day, political processes are, anyway, socially and historically contingent – in Africa as elsewhere.

Bettina Engels