
Informal Institutions And Citizenship In Rural Africa: Risk and Reciprocity In Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire is a well-written and beautifully-produced book by Cambridge University Press. Published as part of the publisher's prestigious Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics Series, with University of Washington-Seattle Professor Margaret Levi as its General Editor, the 292-page book has been authored by Indiana University Political Science Professor Lauren M. MacLean, who specializes on African politics.

Supported by prestigious research funding, including a postdoctoral funding from the famous Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Health Policy, Professor MacLean traveled to West Africa to conduct research in both Ghana and the Ivory Coast (also known as Cote d’Ivoire). The contents of this very useful book go a long way to challenge previous assumptions dealing with institutions in general as well as social capital and, indeed, the nature of the African state. In doing so, she thoroughly investigates the historical aspects of political-cum-economic change in selected communities of both West African nations.

The uniqueness of the book partly lies in the fact that Professor MacLean chose two respective Akan groups in Ghana and the Ivory Coast to study, underscoring how the groups had invariably had similar political and cultural institutions before the arrival of European colonialists. In spite of the similarities, the author still discovered differences between the two nations with respect to what she terms as informal institutions of reciprocity and indigenous notions of citizenship.

Knowing that some political skeptics would or could question the rationale for basing her research on two countries, she admirably and promptly pointed out, in her introduction, inter alia: “Indeed, over the past 100 years, the countries of Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire [Ivory Coast] in West Africa have been considered successful models of democratic and economic development at different points....” (introduction). For a meaningful study, the author selected four Akan villages; she informs her readers that the four of them are in the rain forest zone of West Africa.

Divided into three parts (as Parts I-III), the author endeavored to answer two specific research queries, both of which are interconnected: the initial one is about how “the informal institutions of reciprocity differ in such surprising ways in similar Akan villages on either side of the Ghana-Cote d’Ivoire border? The second query deals with “what were the consequences of these different information institutions of reciprocity for the practice of citizenship”? (page 6). In her efforts to answer the queries within the realm of the three delineated parts of the book, Professor MacLean went further to introduce a third question, although she planned to pose and answer only two: “If their [Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire] pre-colonial cultures and political histories were so similar, why did Ghanaians and Ivoirians from these regions conceptualize citizenship and participate in local and national politics so differently?”

While readers will find the author’s answers to be lucidly distilled on the 292 pages of Informal Institutions and Citizenship in Rural Africa, Dr. MacLean, among several details, posited: “I argue that diverse histories of colonial and postcolonial state formation have stimulated these puzzling local level differences in the informal institutions of social reciprocity and citizenship in rural Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire,” (page 7). She immediately
offers excellent histo-political lesson from the 1884 Berlin Conference, sometimes referred to as the scramble for Africa, whereby, as she put it, “competing to expand their colonial empires, the European powers met in Berlin and agreed to carve ‘this magnificent African cake’ into pieces,” (p. 7). Here, the author was quoting Hochschild’s 1998 work, in which her fellow scholar quoted Belgian King Leopold as being “credited with describing Africa in this way prior to the Berlin Conference.”

Above all, Professor MacLean offered the impressive thesis that “a more centralized and expansive role for the colonial and postcolonial state in Cote d’Ivoire ironically stimulated a greater volume of informal reciprocal exchange during the late 1990s. But this reciprocity was more heavily concentrated on the nuclear family.” University of Florida’s Distinguished Professor Emeritus Goran Hyden and several scholars – including Anne Pitcher of University of Michigan; Michael Bratton, Michigan State University; Daniel Posner, UCLA – have hailed this excellent book. Hyden a detailed positive assessment that, *inter alia*, concluded: “This is an excellent contribution to the study of African politics…” I, indeed, concurred wholeheartedly with his assessment and, indeed, with other laudations for *Informal Institutions And Citizenship In Rural Africa*.

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