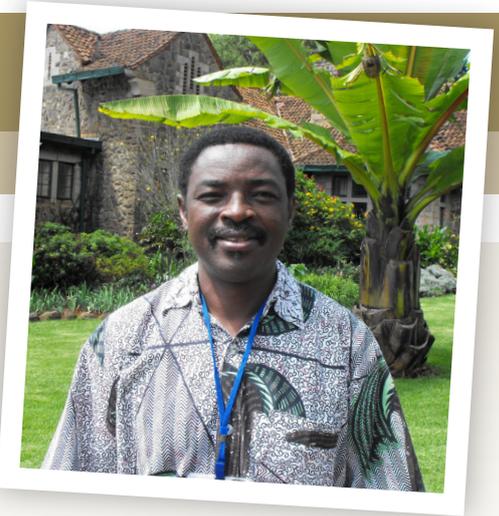




### Civil Societies and Conflict in Africa

Hippolyt A.S. Pul<sup>1</sup>



The debate over whether or not Africa had civil societies before the mid-1990s is either a non-issue or irrelevant.

The preoccupation should instead be with the extent to which contemporary organisations that populate the civil space in Africa are relevant to the ordinary people, in comparison to the indigenous or pre-colonial civil society organisations (CSOs) that preceded them. For the purposes of the latter, arguments that civil societies emerged in Africa from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, during the wave of agitation for democratic governance, derive from selective historical amnesia. This is a choice that seeks to obliterate the existence and roles of pre-independence associations such as the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (ARPS) of West Africa. Like others strewn across the continent, the ARPS fought the colonial government of the Gold Coast on the Land Bill of 1897 and subsequently launched the call for independence.

Beyond the colonial era, such arguments also neglect to consider

the structure of the civil space in pre-colonial Africa, which derived from a completely different world view in traditional African common spaces that made little distinction between family, faith, economics, and politics, and therefore the consequential binary and exclusionary definition of spaces that distinguishes private from public, collective from the individual, political from economic, among others. In the cosmovision of most African societies, everything was, and is, part of everything: politics, governance, spirituality, economic life, private life and public life were all one – holistically integrated and inseparable. Therefore, the distinction between what constituted public, private and economic spaces was blurred. This world view presumed, for instance, that political structures, be they under the hierarchical chieftaincy or dispersed clan-heads systems of political organisation, existed to serve the common good, here defined as the greater good

or interests of the dead, the living, and the unborn. In other words, in the pre-colonial view of the world, African societies had no need for the boundaries that separated private, public and economic spaces – boundaries that Western epistemology has used to define the civil space in contrast to the public or market spaces.

The unbounded nature of the communal space did not mean that the functions attributed to civil society today were absent; neither does it infer that there were no actors, institutions and organisations that performed those functions. Within this communitarian world view that emphasised the supremacy of the collective good over private rights there were, nonetheless, independent forms of associational life that had the responsibility to hold public officeholders (chiefs and clan-heads) and economic actors to account. In other words, there were

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groups that played the roles of what contemporary CSOs are supposed to do – being the watchdogs against abuses and excesses that inure to the common good. Groups of men, women and the youth, organised along different professional, trade, faith, or social lines, performed different roles in making sure that the ship of the political community kept its course in furthering the greater common good.

The imposition of colonial and postcolonial structures and systems of governance severed from the roots of traditional societies in Africa; the enforcement of the binary separation of faith and politics, euphemistically framed as the separation of church and state; and the entrenchment of individualistic economic materialism under the guise of rational-choice market economics at the expense of the Ubuntu model of socio-political and economic organisation that characterised most African societies, undoubtedly changed the nature, structure and operational requirements in the common space – the bounded spaces that constitute African countries today. Concomitantly, these colonial interjections generated new socio-political and economic challenges that demanded new forms of civic engagements for the preservation of the commonwealth and common good in Africa. For instance, increased corruption and multiple forms of political exclusions in the post-colonial state generated violent conflicts across the continent. All the coups d'état in Africa from the 1960s through the 1980s were staged to rid countries of corrupt political leaders, create more inclusive systems of governance and make the promise of independence happen – development in freedom for the people. Similarly, the civil wars and armed insurrections that have scarred the face of Africa since the mid-1980s all claim to be fighting for the same issues.

Irrespective of the merits and

demerits of the *raison d'être* they proffered and the contributions they made towards sanitising the public spheres, these upheavals deepened and perpetuated poverty on the continent through the loss of life,

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In many cases, community-based organisations (CBOs) were, and continue to be, the first responders to various conflict-generated emergencies.

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livelihoods, and displacement of large numbers of people. The weakening or disappearance of the traditional social safety nets in the wake of individualistic market economies increased the vulnerability of the poor, the weak, and the marginalised. With faith out of the public sphere in principle, morality held no sway over public action of individuals and groups. Hence, corruption in all its shades has deepened and spread its roots to remain the bane of politics and development in Africa. The hope of development in dignity that independence promised has vanished and many citizens are no freer or materially better off in the postcolonial state than they were before independence.

These changes in the politico-economic and social structures of Africa necessitated the emergence of different (not new) kinds of civil society actors to fill the void of state failures. The technical and operational sophistication required to deal with the new challenges may simply have outstripped the capacities of indigenous CSOs. Hence, if the ripple effects of perestroika crumbled the dominant single-party dictatorships in Africa in the 1990s and paved the way for the emergence of different forms

of associational life, this does not deny the pre-existence of other forms of associational life. On the contrary, what has emerged is a synergy between the old and the new, which makes the new shine. In many cases, community-based organisations (CBOs) were, and continue to be, the first responders to various conflict-generated emergencies. They were, and still are, *sine qua non* in the operational arrangements of most conventional CSOs. Relief and development NGOs rely on women's, farmers', and youth groups, among others, to reach their target populations. Similarly, rights-based CSOs that champion the fight against corrupt, exploitative and non-responsive government and/or corporate entities; and demands for greater transparency, accountability and equity from the public and market-sector actors often need base support from community-level groups to give credence and legitimacy to their programmes.

Paradoxically, while these conventional CSOs have served some needs of society, changing perceptions of the motives of these new forms of civil organisations and the alliances they bring to the public sphere in Africa have been called into question. Of note in recent times, some African CSOs have joined their international partners to widely condemn the prohibition of homosexuality and same-sex marriage in several African countries. They denounce the prohibitions as infringements on the rights and liberties of individuals. This example raises questions about how African CSOs generate and pursue their agendas and whose interests these CSOs really serve. It is probably true that African societies have long repressed public manifestation of homosexuality and other forms of sexual orientation these societies consider as aberrations harmful to the public good. If this was the case and constituted a huge human rights violation, the questions that come up are: Why didn't the African CSOs

notice and pick this up themselves? Why did they have to wait for Western governments to make it an issue first? Can they genuinely be speaking for the populations they profess to represent when the trigger for their actions manifestly come from without not within?

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We have noted that in the cosmovision of most African societies, the common good takes precedence.

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We have noted that in the cosmovision of most African societies, the common good takes precedence. Hence, private actions of citizens deemed to affect the common health and wealth of all are frowned upon and heavily sanctioned. Among the categories of abominable private acts, private sexual rights came in for heavy scrutiny and sanctions if they did not conform to the values perceived to serve the collective and transcendental common good – the good of the dead, the living and the unborn. Consequently, pre-marital sex, pregnancy out of wedlock, and homosexuality were proscribed and heavily sanctioned in most Africa societies. The rational was not to deny anyone their birth rights, but because the enjoyment of these private rights was seen to offend and negatively affect the collective good of the community. In other words, private sexual rights have huge implications for the common good of the entire society. Hence, although the attainment of the common good should not necessarily negate respect for private rights, clear limits were set; the quest for private pleasure should not be at the expense of the common good.

It is against this background that the positions that some of the CSOs in Africa have taken in the same-sex marriage debate raises questions about their allegiance and who they represent. From the perspective of normative inter-communal (or national) relations, shouldn't the judgment of what is good or bad for a society be purely a normative affair devoid of any international criteria of assessment? Should one society judge the morals of another and thereby impose its values on the other? Should it be right for a set of countries to foist their values on another set of countries under pain of any form of punishment, simply because the latter do not subscribe to the values of the former?

Indeed, analogical questions that have not been asked in the debate over Western demands for the legalisation of homosexuality and same-sex marriage in Africa are: Would the Western governments that are criminalising the choice of some African countries to prohibit acts they consider offensive to the common good tolerate a campaign by African governments or CSOs in the streets of London and Washington for causes that the West considers offensive to its values and world views? To be concrete, even though the West might be getting around its drug problem by legalising the production and use of marijuana, would Western governments tolerate any campaigns by African governments and CSOs on their soil for the legalisation and liberalisation of the trade in heroin, cocaine, and other hard drugs on the grounds that banning them infringes on the rights of individual citizens (and there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of traders and consumers) to produce, trade in, and use these drugs? Would they tolerate advocacy for the legalisation of polygamy in their societies because it is the belief of some citizens that they have the right to more than one conjugal partner at the same time? Would they take kindly to any African government that sponsors and funds these campaigns in their

territory? And African CSOs must ask themselves whether or not they would have free rein to champion these causes or find vociferous support for them among their peers in these lands.

Working within the bounds of the conventional definition, CSOs exist to restrain the excesses of the state and the market against the defenceless; to preserve the sanctity, sanity and common good of society. The independence of CSOs is, therefore, a necessary precondition for the execution of this function. This is why the questions above underscore concerns about the legitimacy and representational authority of African CSOs when they champion donor-driven agendas, or simply jump onto the bandwagon of ideologies that are alien to the world views of the communities they profess to serve. Hence it is relevant to ask, in the case of same sex marriage debate, what constituencies they represent; on whose authority do they speak; and to what extent they truly represent the people they claim to represent, rather than using their campaigns as decoys for their survival missions that seek to attract funding and status from external actors and institutions?

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African CSOs are at risk of losing their legitimacy and relevance as the defender of the defenceless and the voice of the voiceless when their philosophical foundations, the agendas they choose to pursue, and their modes of operation are completely alien to the people they profess to serve. Legitimacy is derived

from the collective values and views of the society, not in abstraction or by imposition from other world views. Hence, when African CSOs are perceived to have no foundations and agendas of their own that root them in the societies they serve, they lose their legitimacy and power of representation. In other words, to the extent that African CSOs are mere echoes of the voices of interests outside Africa without recourse to the values and needs of the people they profess to serve, they become no better than corporate entities in the business world who also serve the needs and interests of society by operating from world views not necessarily rooted in the values of their client communities. In that respect, even when the CSOs manage to deliver services, the people they serve are clients, not owners of the agendas that the CSOs prosecute. The only difference is that, unlike in the market place, the client communities of the CSOs do not pay directly for their services; someone else – governments or corporate entities and foundations, mainly foreign – pay on their behalf.

To have any legitimacy, relevance, and the power of attorney to represent Africa in the world, conventional CSOs in African must re-root their agendas and actions in the values and principles of the people they claim to serve. Otherwise, they become no better than appendages and stooges of external states, market actors, and other entities; alien to their own people, and agents for the perpetuation of the very conditions that they believe they are fighting

against – the repression of the will and potential of Africa to evolve its own homegrown capacities for holistic and inclusive development. They run the risk of falling into the trap that faith-based organisations did when they willingly, or unwittingly, became vehicles of the colonial

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enterprise – used to propagate values and world views that facilitated the successful subjugation of the African faith, values and development processes to Western ones. To regain credence, they must learn from their indigenous counterparts and root their work in what Africans want, not in what some donor tells them to do. If societal change is what they want, they must understand that true and lasting change comes from within, not without. And if their aim is for holistic and sustainable development, they need to recall that if the Eastern world, including China and India, has survived and is now regaining prominence in the world politically

and economically, this is largely because these countries have succeeded in rooting their evolution in their values, while taking only the best from the technologies that the West has to offer; not by swallowing hook, line and sinker everything that other cultures try to impose on them.

A dire consequence of the failure of African civil society to help guide the ship state to serve the greater common good through founding its political and development agendas on the values and interests of the people will be the emergence of another form of actors in the civil space – the militarised youth or citizen soldiers who are increasingly taking matters into their own hands to provide what the state and the markets, and indeed, conventional civil society, have failed to do – the guarantee of basic human rights, namely, livelihoods, security, safety, and religious freedoms. If the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and conflicts in Mali, Central Africa Republic, and the splintered rebel warfare and violent conflicts in Central and East Africa are anything to go by, citizen vigilantes and armed militias will be the next occupants of Africa's civil space. Close to 70% of Africa's population is below 30 years of age (<http://africa-youth.org/>), with an estimated 200 million Africans falling between the ages of 15 and 24 (UN). With large swathes of this age group being poorly educated, unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable but with lots of experience with the gun as ex-combatants, this new brand of CSOs will have no want of recruits. ■

# Dangerous Associations: Legal Homophobia and the Changing Politics of Civil Society

Ebenezer Obadare<sup>1</sup>

In January 2014, President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria signed into law the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013, which criminalises marriage or civil union between persons of the same sex.

Anyone who violates the law is liable for a prison term of 14 years. A facilitator, meaning 'a person or group of persons who administers, witnesses, abets or aids the solemnisation of a same-sex marriage of civil union, or supports the registration, operation and sustenance of gay clubs, societies, organisations, processions or meetings in Nigeria', can expect to be an inmate of one of the country's notoriously shabby jails for a term of 10 years.

Denunciation of the law was swift. Across the international community, it was widely condemned for persecuting people for something as natural as their sexuality and for giving a veneer of legality to what is in essence nothing more than pure bigotry. I was among a group of twenty-four signatories to a release condemning the so-called law and calling for a travel ban and denial of visas and other travel permits to targeted Nigerian state functionaries.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if the aim of the law was to keep gay people out of the public gaze, it definitely back-fired. For some individuals, the very signing of the Act was just the cue they needed to, as it were, come out of the closet. The best example is that of Kenyan writer and author of the much-discussed "How to Write About Africa",

Binyavanga Wainaina, who not only came out as gay, but also spoke of his determination to continue to visit Nigeria despite the possibility of arrest and a prolonged jail term.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in addition to unleashing a torrent of condemnation, the Act arguably ended up achieving the exact opposite of what its proponents presumably desired: putting homosexuality on the public agenda and increasing homosexuals' public visibility.

In this specific sense at least, one might argue that legal homophobia across Africa (homosexuality is considered illegal in 37 African countries) has been a boon for civil society. By drafting and enacting laws criminalising homosexuality, and by engaging in an aggressive demonisation of 'deviant' sexualities, individual African governments have unwittingly helped to lift the lid on discussions of such ticklish subjects as sexuality, sexual identity, pleasure, eroticism, anal sex, etc. This nascent banalisation of sex is unfolding in a social terrain marked by the increasing popularity and availability of technologies of private and social communication, the majority of which, incidentally, are outside the control of African states, if not states in general. In various tech-spaces (Facebook, online media,



Twitter, etc), and across generational divides, Africans are not only pursuing pleasure, they are also managing to find the time to debate it.

To be sure, most of the debate (like much of the pursuit?) can be crude. For one, the vocabulary of exchange is not often decorous and will grate even the most passionate proponents of free speech. However, and most significantly, both opponents and defenders of homosexuality now face the discursive imperative of having to offer reasons for their positions, which means that even as the heat from such exchanges simmers, a new sensibility is slowly being created around issues of sexuality and their complexity.

The power and symbolism of this ascendant formation cannot be underestimated, though I have to admit that, in a rapidly changing and still largely volatile social terrain, nothing can be taken for granted. Still, it is worth noting that House of Rainbow, Nigeria's first openly 'gay

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<sup>2</sup>The full text of our statement titled 'Nigeria's Anti-Gay Law is a Crime Against Reason' is available here: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/153530-nigerias-anti-gay-law-crime-reason.html>

<sup>3</sup>The full text of Mr. Wainaina's declaration on his sexuality is available here: <http://africasacountry.com/i-am-a-homosexual-mum/>

church' pastored by the Reverend Jide Macaulay, continues to welcome worshippers, even though many sessions are of necessity held in secrecy. House of Rainbow's guerrilla spirituality is illustrative of the grit and feistiness of a small number of social agents determined not to leave the physical, if not social, ground uncontested to opponents of homosexuality; a reminder that though the debate is not always construed as such, the campaign against sexual bigotry in Nigeria and other African countries boils down in the end to these four things: what it means to be human, what it means to live in a democratic society, what it means for a society to have an autonomous public sphere, and what it means to be a free citizen, untrammelled in the pursuit of one's individual realization and upliftment. It is, at its core therefore, about the social projects of civil society.

I noted earlier that, by becoming a cause célèbre, anti-gay mobilisation has been a surprising boon for civil society in Africa. Let me amend that by adding that it is a knife that cuts both ways, for there is clearly another sense in which legal homophobia is clearly a menace to civil society. If a basic desideratum for a robust civil society is the freedom of citizens to form various kinds of associations, it is clear that the Nigerian Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act is an assault on this fundamental freedom. By prohibiting 'the registration of gay clubs, societies and organisations, their sustenance, processions and meetings'; or, even more vaguely, by forbidding 'administering, witnessing, abetting,' or 'aiding' the solemnisation of a same-sex marriage, the law puts a dangerous bridle on sociability itself. What, for instance, does 'witnessing' a same-sex marriage mean? If I view live footage of a same-sex marriage ceremony online, have I witnessed it? And as for aiding and abetting: If a cab driver

takes a passenger to a destination that happens to be the venue of the passenger's marriage to someone of the same sex, has the driver aided and abetted? Does printing the invitation cards of a same-sex marriage ceremony qualify as aiding and abetting?

To ponder such questions is to highlight the many ways in which the Nigerian law is decidedly obtuse. Nor is it any less threatening for being so. For example, all that the government – it doesn't matter at what level – has to do to shut down a club or vilify a political opponent, is to claim that such a club is patronised by gays, or that the particular opponent associates with gay people, or is himself gay. Given the said ambiguity of the law and the atmosphere of fear that it has created,<sup>4</sup> neither of these possibilities can be ruled out.

Hence, a real fear of physical violence coupled with the widespread moral opprobrium attaching to homosexuality is arguably the reason why many people who ordinarily identify with and articulate progressive causes have maintained a strategic silence on the subject of homosexuality and gay rights. This silence speaks to broader tensions and divisions within civil society in Nigeria, and is the final sense in which struggles over homosexuality have obviously contoured the politics of civil society and highlighted differences among its major actors.

Forged in the heat of anti-military and pro-democracy agitation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary Nigerian civil society has always found it easy to mobilise around issues of social justice and political liberalization, at least in the abstract. This has always given civil society – championed, if not in fact driven by – an educated and well-placed elite with vital connections to the state, an appearance of uniformity.

However, while it was easy to take a stand against military dictatorship or corruption in the public sector in the name of social justice, homosexuality, bound up as it is with moral disgust and notions of African identity, has proven to be a different beast altogether.

In any event, civil society's reactions to anti-gay mobilization, which culminated in the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, have assumed three distinct patterns. These are:

**Outright silence or self-censorship:** This seems to be the prevailing attitude. Here, the social actor remains, to all intents and purposes, socially visible, continues to contribute as widely and consistently as ever to 'urgent' social issues, but fastidiously steers clear of any reference (positive or negative) to homosexuality. This position is perhaps perfectly encapsulated by the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria (NHRC), which has yet to make a single pronouncement on the law criminalising homosexuality. Similarly, little of note has emanated from the bulk of 'first-generation' pro-democracy civil society organizations (CSOs) such as the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR) and Constitutional Rights Project (CRP), a fact which may not be unconnected to their decline in institutional capacity relative to the 1990s. For most CSOs, therefore, not saying anything at all is seen as a better strategy than taking a stand against the law, and hence for gay rights.

**Legalism:** some activists have continued to canvass a legal challenge to the law, though without necessarily volunteering their personal opinion on the subject of homosexuality itself.

**Condemnation/Opposition:** This is where the division among civil society groups has been most apparent. As

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<sup>4</sup>The immediate aftermath of the signing of the law has already seen a mass of arrests in different parts of the country. See for instance: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/15/amnesty-gays-arrestedin4nigerianstates.html>

said above, most of the CSOs (and civil society activists who came to public attention in the 1990s have maintained a studiously lukewarm attitude. In contrast, a 'second generation' of NGOs animated solely by issues at the interface of gender, reproductive health and human rights has led the campaign for the recognition of gay rights as human rights. Examples are: Alliance Rights, Changing Attitude of Nigeria, the International Center for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights (INCREASE), Lifeline Christian Center, Life Link, Alternative Lifestyles Foundation of Nigeria (ALFON), Center for Health

Rights and Development, Africa Regional Sexuality Research Center (ARSRC), Queer Alliance-Nigeria, and The Independent Project for Equal Rights (TIPER), and The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIER). While some of these organisations have physical offices, others, like Queer-Alliance Nigeria and The Initiative for Equal Rights are forced to maintain only an online presence.

Two tentative conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing. The first is that the debate over homosexuality has had a major impact on the morphology and functionality of

civil society. Speaking primarily from the Nigerian case, gay debates have furnished a discursive core for contentions over sexuality, desire, eroticism, citizenship, and identity. Second, the debate has highlighted a rough split between what I call the 'first-generation' pro-democracy civil society groups, and latter-day civil society advocacy groups arguably more attuned to, and grounded in, the cosmopolitan ethos of the post-transition period. The eventual success of the latter will depend on what strategies it adopts to sell its case to the public. ■

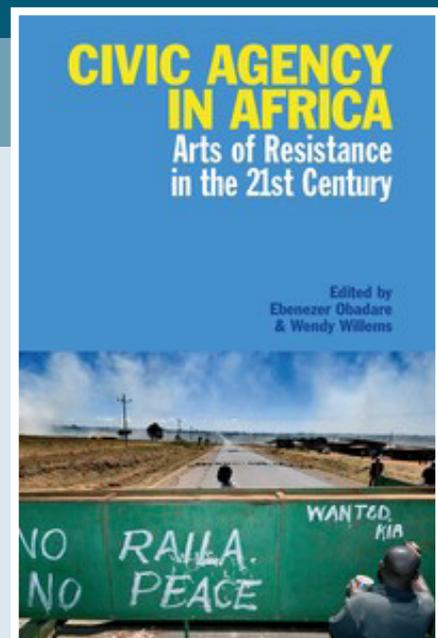
**ANNOUNCEMENT**

## Civic Agency in Africa: arts of resistance in the 21st Century

Eds. Wendy Willems<sup>1</sup> and Ebenezer Obadare<sup>2</sup>

**T**he recent eruption of popular protests across North Africa and the Middle East has reopened academic debate on the meaning and strategies of resistance in the 21st century. This book argues that Western notions of state and civil society provide only a limited understanding of how power and resistance operate in the African context, where informality is central to the way both state officials and citizens exercise agency.

With the principle of informality as a template, the chapters in this volume collectively examine the various modes – organised and unorganised, formal and informal, urban and rural, embodied and discursive, serious and ludic, online and offline, successful and failing – through which Africans contend with power. Resistance takes place against the backdrop of deep fractures in state sovereignty, the remnants of colonial rule and the constraints of a global, neoliberal economic system.



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<sup>2</sup>Ebenezer Obadare is Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Kansas.

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# The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa

## Obadare, Ebenezer (ed.)

BOOK  
REVIEW

Reviewer: Samuel O Oloruntoba<sup>1</sup>

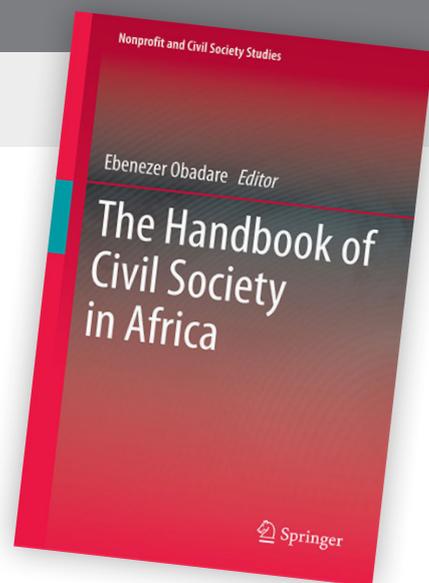
This book is a path-breaking work on civil societies in Africa in its conceptualisation, context, content and arrangement.

The richness and relevance of the title are discernible in the challenge it poses to the Eurocentric epistemological dominance of civil society in terms of meaning, usefulness and applicability in what is referred to as part of 'the most of the world'. The editor sets the tone of this epistemic disobedience regarding the understanding of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa by refuting Gellner's idea of the non-applicability of the concept of civil society in the African context. According to the editor, the book 'turns the tables on Gellner and his philosophical project' and thus gives 'civil society research in Africa a new lease of life, furnishing a continually productive ideational framework for imagining state-society relations, the modes of enactment and composition of the public sphere, and the varieties and variabilities of resistance'. It is unique among general discourses on civil societies in Africa because of its multidisciplinary approach, which ensures a combination of historical, theoretical and praxis methodologies from different disciplines, practitioners and spaces. A distinctive feature is the inclusion of diverse regional perspectives on the understanding of CSOs in different parts of the continent. This section provides a rich comparison of the historical trajectories, experiences, successes and challenges in their engagement

with the state and donors, as well as the impact of the operations of CSOs on governance and the people in different parts of Africa.

The book is divided into five parts, with part one containing the core themes, which include topics such as: Escape from tyranny: civil society and democratic struggles in Africa; Civil society and religion; 'Good' state, 'bad' state: loss and longing in postcolonial Zimbabwe; and NGO accountability in Africa. Part two covers regional perspectives of civil society in Africa, with case studies from the Maghreb, East Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa. Part three examines civil societies in the shadow of neoliberalism, while part four includes chapters on development: gender, sexuality and civic change. The last part includes chapters that interrogate aid, volunteering and philanthropy.

Although the contributors adopted different theoretical and methodological approaches to interrogate their chosen topics, there is a near consensus that CSOs operate outside the realm of the state to check the excesses of the state, intervene when there is disorder, identify with the vulnerable and the poor segments of the population, champion the cause of democracy and seek to make the state accountable to the people. While some of the authors recognise



the existence of CSOs in pre-colonial Africa, many are of the opinion that the third wave of democracy in Africa has spurred the multiplication of CSOs, as well as intensified their operations in African countries. Contributors such as Darren Key and Modupe Odukoya believe, and rightly so, that CSOs were part of the struggles for political liberalisation in Africa in the 1980s. In Jacob Mati's formulation in relation to neo-liberalism and CSOs, he notes that civil society is a 'site of struggle for hegemony between hegemonic neoliberal forces and counter-hegemonic forces', with each having a base of support in the society.

Many of the authors acknowledge the strong connections that most CSOs have with donor organisations, especially when it comes to funding. The result is that many of them unwittingly serve to advance the interests of the donors, thus leading to a conflict of interest between a genuine concern to serve the interests of the community and subservience to donor interests. This results in the alienation of the CSOs from the people, as well as mistrust of their intentions. Furthermore, while the donor community regards CSOs

>> PAGE 10

as being more transparent than the state, experiences from the field, as narrated by Titilayo Mamattah, reveal that corruption is also rampant within CSOs in Africa. This problem, as Ronelle Burger and Dineo Seabe would argue, is accentuated by the complex and difficult 'standard' accounting and reporting system imposed by donors, which often fails to take the local context of operations into consideration.

Apart from the conventional conceptualisation of CSOs and how they operate, this volume includes diverse forms and methods of engagement of CSOs with the state. Protest methods, including the use of humour, satire,

cartoons and the production and circulation of political ephemeral and viral messaging, have been common among the marginalised sections of the population such as okada riders in Nigeria (Carole Enahoro and Daniel Hammett). These methods are useful within the context of an

and its refusal to recognise and protect the interests of the people.

One other key contribution of this volume to the discourse on CSOs in Africa is the variation in the density of CSO activities in urban and rural areas. In a very interesting chapter, Kirk Helliker notes the distinction

A distinctive feature is the inclusion of diverse regional perspectives on the understanding of CSOs in different parts of the continent.

between civil society and political society. Members of the former, largely based in cities, have rights, while the latter, based in the spaces beyond the civil in both urban

and rural areas ('living outside the fringes of civil society') only have entitlements, which they may not get as they are generally poor and voiceless.■

absent and authoritarian state such as in Zimbabwe. The use of ridicule, humour and satire serves as a form of defiance and subtle protest against unpopular policies of the government

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, University of South Africa, South Africa. Publisher: Springer, New York

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**In the programme**

**Regional Network Meetings**

Thursday, July 24, 5:30-6:30 pm, Vom Stein Haus

Africa Civil Society Research Network (Vom Stein Haus 05)

Asia Pacific Regional Network (Vom Stein Haus 116)

European Network Meeting (Vom Stein Haus 06)

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Network (Vom Stein Haus 118)

**ISTR General Membership Meeting**

Thursday, July 24, 12:30 – 1:30 pm, H Building

The meeting will include presentations of Awards and announcement of the 2016 Conference location.

The ISTR Voluntas Best Paper Awards for 2012 and 2013 will be presented. The committee consists of Kari Steen-Johnson (Institutt for Samfunnsforskning, Norway) as chair and Taco Brandsen, Itay Greenspan, Julie Fisher Melton, Mario Roitter (Argentina) , Ali Simsek (Turkey), and Naoto Yamauchi (Japan).

If you have not begun your preparations visit [www.istr.org/?Muenster](http://www.istr.org/?Muenster) for travel, accommodation and conference details.

Looking forward to seeing you all there!



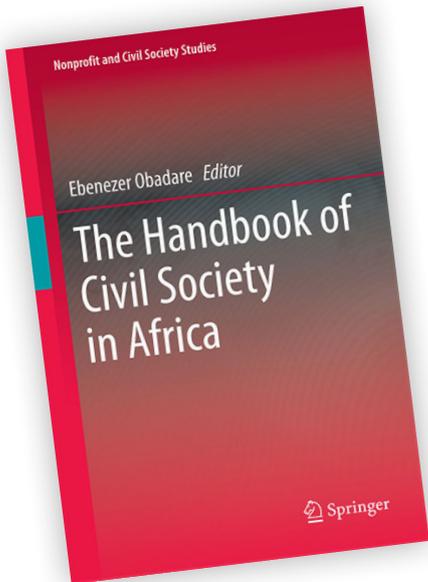
# The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa

## Obadare, Ebenezer (ed.)



Reviewer: Jendele Hungbo<sup>1</sup>

The field of civil society studies, though new, continues to evolve in interesting ways.



In Africa, the dearth of relevant texts focused primarily on the subject remains one of the critical challenges to the growth of civil society studies. This gap shrinks with the emergence of *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa*. Inspired by a recent work to which the volume editor had contributed, the text offers a critical intervention in the reductionist interpretation of African society and its capabilities, which often produces skewed representations in some scholarly efforts. The book opens a new vista in the understanding of this field of scholarly endeavour, bringing to centre stage African perspectives that had hitherto occupied a marginal space in discourses of civil society activities.

This text brings anthropology scholar Ernest Gellner and sympathisers with his Atlantic-centric understanding of civil society into sharp focus by examining the existence of the practice and use of civil society in the cultural composition and everyday life of people on the African continent and, by extension, other non-Atlantic spaces. In doing this, the volume editor points out in his introduction how 'the glare of Gellnerian determinism' (p.2) continues to encumber thought processes and the understanding of civil society as a site for academic consideration. Set in twenty-six chapters spread across five sections, the book offers a cross-disciplinary illustrative compendium of theoretical and practical analysis of civil society and third-sector phenomena in Africa. Even the sections, it is asserted, serve as 'analytical canopies for the constituent chapters' (p.3).

Dealing with the question of religion in the third chapter, Shobana Shankar touches on an area often neglected in scholarship, not just in Africa but globally. She extends the debate by dealing with the complicity of faith in stunting the growth of civil society in Africa. For Shankar, 'the process by which wealth has become a basis for divine benediction has also created a monopolisation of power at the state level', while the prioritisation of 'material wealth as a religious

aspiration appears to disturb the balance between individual and communal well-being' (pp38-39).

In line with the overall objective of the book, Wendy Willems argues in Chapter 4 that 'dominant approaches to media and civil society in Africa have deployed definitions of media and civil society that have masked more than they have revealed' (p.44). The present text unmask the field in very creative ways. This chapter, though primarily seeking to 'historicise the symbiotic relation between media and civil society in Africa', sets the tone for a more critical understanding of civil society relations in the African public sphere where the media remain a crucial factor.

Julia Gallagher's return to Jean Jacques Rousseau and the centrality of a social contract not only revives an old-time discourse about the conceptualisation(s) of the state; it also illustrates, using a post-colonial Zimbabwe case study, a major dilemma of civil society activism. Where a state perceived from outside as 'bad' enjoys the benefit of the doubt and possibility of redemption from a large chunk of its local population, the search for the ideal social-contract-driven mechanisms of public policy becomes quite arduous. Holding up 'seven stories of the bad state' in spite of which a good

number of Zimbabweans would still rise to the defence of the apparatus of governance, this chapter theorises the ethical challenge which contributes to the misunderstanding of civil society and its possible conflation with unbridled dissent, especially in emerging democracies.

Ronelle Burger and Dineo Seabe's contribution on NGO accountability in Africa rounds off the 'core themes' section of the text. The significance of this chapter can better be appreciated in the pervasiveness of the need for transformation within NGOs, especially beyond

In dealing with the impact of neoliberalism on civil society in Africa, the three chapters that make up the third section of this text offer a composite argument beginning with Jacob Mati's comparative consideration of South Africa and Kenya. Though Usman Tar's 'Civil Society and Neoliberalism' would have served as a better prelude to the other two chapters in this section, the reader is still able to get the drift of the polemic implicating neoliberal capital and ideology in the practice and performance of civil society across different countries of the continent.

limitations in civil society scholarship seem poised for collapse. The book offers evidence that Africa's many contradictions and, in many cases, its diversity, provide a fertile breeding ground for civil society institutions and activism. An example of this occurs as early as the second chapter of the book, where the protests that greeted a state policy of increasing fuel prices in Nigeria becomes an entry point for Daren Kew and Modupe Oshikoya to deal with the subject. In this chapter, the limitations and internal contradictions of civil society are brought to the fore through case studies selected from across the continent. It is indeed instructive that this chapter deals with what the authors designate as 'escape from tyranny', which has become a major preoccupation of civil society universally. Beyond the pedantic or explicit, civil society has become a far more embedded phenomenon, especially in Africa and, as such, it may at times require discerning minds to decipher it.

In dealing with the basic assumptions that had previously consigned African civil society studies to the margins of scholarship, *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa* illuminates the subject in quite significant ways, rescuing an unfairly regarded sphere of study from the possibility of foreclosure in an increasingly skewed academy. The historical accounts drawn from across the African continent to illustrate most of the chapters reinforce the effectiveness of the text as a significant material in understanding the nuances of civil society in Africa. In spite of its minor gaps, which in any case offer opportunities for future research on the subject, *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa*, is no doubt a strong and long overdue addition to literature in the field. ■

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the requirements imposed on them by their donors and other external bodies. The authors signal a clear need for civil society organisations in Africa to not just be accountable but also be seen to be transparent and democratic in both governance and advocacy. Suggesting 'self-regulation' and community participation' as instruments that have the potential of retrieving the slipping credibility of NGOs, Burger and Seabe offer a manual for practitioners and field officers of civil society not only in Africa but anywhere else in the world.

The 'Regional Perspectives' section appropriates experiences from the Maghreb (using the Arab Spring as an entry point), East Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa. Though such regional perspectives serve the book in good stead, the exclusion of Central Africa seems to deny the reader an opportunity to interact with experience in this crucial sub-region, which is a breeding ground for civil society efforts, perhaps more than any of the other spaces given attention here.

There are six chapters in Section Four, which deal with questions of gender, sexuality and civic change. This section allows the text to focus on minority groups in relation to civil society activities in Africa. The section extends the argument to give consideration to the domains of oral traditions as well as popular culture in general and how they become, through their different platform of expression, sites for civil society activism in Africa. Section Five focuses on 'Aid, Volunteering and Philanthropy'. Beginning with the contribution of Alan Fowler (Chapter 23), where clarifications are provided on the designations and identities of different types of civil society organisations operating in Africa, the section wraps with Ebenezer Obadare's theorization of civic agency and citizenship in Africa, giving it relevance across disciplinary divides.

With the emergence of *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa*, the hitherto existing borders of definition and classification that tend to create spatio-thematic