

ENGLUND, HARRI. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Pp. 260. ISBN: 978-0-520-24923-3 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-0-520-24924-0 (paperback).

As the last two decades have seen a certain political re-enchantment with the idea of 'democracy' in the postcolonies, ethnography has had to enlarge its net of engagement to appraise the new practices enacted on its behalf. In this new ethnographic gaze, the central questions to answer are these: what meanings about 'democracy' and its associated notion of 'rights' do these practices in the postcolonies evoke? Most importantly, what are the paradoxes or contradictions between the re-enchantment spurred by the democratic imagination and these practices that flow from actual efforts at establishing various versions of 'democracy' and 'rights', in the postcolonies?

These questions are premised on the understanding that democracy and human rights take many meanings, not only among and within countries in the West but also in various local contexts (see Paley 2002). In turn, this premise of a multiplicity of meanings for democracy and rights raises a deeper theoretical discomfort in anthropology, between a universal 'Human' and a cultural 'human', where the line between universalism and relativism in the rights discourse cannot be easily drawn (see Nagengast and Turner 1997). Thus, ethnographies of the multiple forms, practices and meanings associated with democracy in various contexts have begun emerging, as for example in the case of South East Asia (cf. Michelluti 2007; Spencer 2007; Shah 2007; Barnejee 1999).

In the context of African postcolonies, some anthropological work has outlined local meanings attached mainly to the *idea* of democracy (cf. for example, Karlström, 1996). Yet much of the culturally embedded and transforming practices enacted in the name of 'democracy' between the 1990s and 2000s are still to receive critical anthropological engagement. Harri Englund's *Prisoners of Freedom* begins the task of filling this gap, in more ways than one. The book is organized in eight chapters preceded by an introduction to the themes and issues that constitute the core of Englund's argument.

The thrust of the argument in *Prisoners of Freedom* is that by the nature of both their understanding and practice, the democratic agenda and its articulation of human rights by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and human rights activists in Malawi and to some extent in Zambia have been purged of their empowering potencies (p. 37). To Englund, this is largely the result of the cultural attachment towards elitism that is amply displayed by these NGOs and activists. Englund sees their superficial focus on the linguistic translation of democracy as the freedom of speech and its political articulation in these terms, as de-politicizing or 'containing' the transformative possibilities of the full meaning of democracy in these two countries. Englund's claim, then, is that those actors, such as human rights activists, NGOs and foreign agency donors who sponsor projects like the EU Commission's civic education project, are the very "prisoners of freedom" (p. 45). Due to various processes aimed at status-attainment and self-regulation, such as their mimicry of elitist dispositions, the latter have unconsciously been articulating a version of rights whose social base is quite thin.

Englund seeks to cast his net of blame for this socially-thin democracy and excessive concern with the rights of free speech beyond the doorsteps of the 'real' elites. In doing this, he shows how cultural values attached to holding 'prestigious' jobs and status-display

in modern Malawi—the desire to perform elitism by these advocates for rights—produces a socially irrelevant version of ‘democracy’. He shows that by its very nature, the linguistic articulation of rights in the native Chichewa national language of Malawians by NGOs and other activists precludes any allusion to social and economic rights, and emphasizes in itself, only an articulation of the citizens’ rights to uninhibited political expression. For example, in chapter two, the most salient observation which Englund makes is that the linguistic translation of “freedoms” in Malawi’s Chichewa or Zambian Chichanya into “*ufulu Wachibadwidwe*” fails to convey the full liberal semantic content of freedoms as broadly encompassing political, economic and social rights (p. 51).

As he argues, underlying the struggles for the democratic “*ufulu Wachibadwiwe*” is the emphatic concern with the deep politics of specific interests in political and civil rights, pushed forward by political leaders in pre-democratic regimes in both Malawi and Zambia (p. 53). However, through a critical examination of samples of translations relating to various documents such as constitutions and rights-asserting instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Englund portrays the process and results of these translations as a curious mixture of politics and ignorance that culminates in the disempowerment of the poor, as social and economic rights and interests go missing as dominant concerns of the current democratic struggles (p. 57–69).

Elsewhere, in chapter three, Englund goes beyond these purged renditions of textual rights discourses which are obviously aimed at a literate audience often located in the urban centres. He focuses on the wider oral interpretations and dissemination of such rights discourses packaged within civic education projects aimed at illiterate segments of populations in both urban and rural contexts. Carrying with them the baggage of the translations that have been established before them, the oral renditions of rights discourses by human rights activists and NGOs prove to be as equally narrow and unaccommodating of social and economic rights as those from translations (p. 70). At best, then, these “Prisoners of Freedom” only succeed in transforming the politics of democratization into a politics of the obnoxious. They instrumentalize educative projects and campaigns only as a strategy of distinction, an opportunity to mimic the elite lifestyle that is otherwise not possible (see pp. 87–93).

Thus, with regards the efforts by NGOs and activists to connect ordinary people to the democratic project and its associated rights discourses, the consequences of this ‘out-of-touch’ approach are far-reaching. In chapter four, for instance, Englund shows how despite the huge logistic and personnel capacities deployed by the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) in Malawi, crucial social problems such as unemployment, HIV/AIDS and food insecurity are unsolved. This ineffectiveness is largely a result of an elitist approach that locates the source of these problems in the ‘community’ rather than the state. In depoliticising these issues, the state was absolved of any responsibility, making these problems illegitimate issues for any substantive discussions of citizens’ rights and democratization in Malawi.

The overall consequence of such a de-politicised articulation of democracy and rights, for the majority of Malawians, has been the loss of emphasis on reducing the economic and social inequalities embedded in the overall economy of power in the country. In this sense, the practice or articulation of democratization and human rights is as much a tragedy of the commons as a tragedy of the elitist civil society actors and organisations that claim

#### BOOK REVIEWS

to fight for citizens' rights. Englund argues, and rightly so, that 'redeeming' the freedoms or rights of Malawians must entail a re-construction of the political and social interventionist agenda, as to enable "explicit and inclusive" negotiations and make contest possible (p. 193). He proposes that the best possible agenda is one that could yield renewed and relevant discussions on the meaning of 'citizenship' in Malawi (p. 201).

As critique to this compelling and well-written book, however, I wish the Malawian political elite were accorded a more visible place. If Englund wants to distribute the blame beyond the political elite for the failure of the democratic agenda in Malawi, what was their role in setting the agenda for a limited meaning for democracy in the first place? This would have helped us to see how strongly or not the practices of NGOs and activists resonate with this narrow agenda. This criticism notwithstanding, the book is a fascinating political ethnography, a valuable addition to the growing body of work that could possibly be labelled as 'ethnographies of democracy' in the postcolonies. Its broad relevance is the lucid picture it paints of practices enacted in the name of democracy as a discursive field which could assume contradictory outcomes. For these strengths the book will be an enriching read for graduate courses on African politics and governance.

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