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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Africa, Human rights, Development, Politics, Administration, International relations

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Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles. By Richard Dowden (New York: Public Affairs, 2009). 592 pp.

Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles tells a story of Africa where communities in very different countries are growing and evolving as well as battling and surviving. Beginning in Chapter One, Richard Dowden tackles the images, perceptions, and realities that the western world shares about Africa, particularly with respect to development and modernization. He rightfully cautions readers, the majority of whom are likely interested in development, poverty reduction, and African politics, that “[o]nly Africans can develop Africa. Outsiders can help, but only if they understand it, work with it” (7). It is in this cautious spirit that Dowden writes the rest of his book, sharing his experiences after decades spent as a journalist throughout the continent. Africa is mostly written as a narrative, not as an analytical text on Africa. However, the style is easy to read and the author makes clear his intent early in the book. Slightly heavy on generalizations, Africa is a solid but brief survey of the various African countries and development issues found on a vast and diverse continent.

Chapters Two and Three open the story from the soil of Uganda where the author first spent time as a teacher during the 1970s. He introduces Ugandan culture and the local institutions that have evolved to meet the needs of small rural communities. He adds to the discussion the importance of old age in Ugandan society, community ownership, and group identity which are important aspects of many African communities. Cold war politics and post-colonial foreign interests become a major source of discussion, beginning with the rise to power of Idi Amin. It is a theme that Dowden carries throughout the remainder of the book.

After introducing Uganda, Dowden returns to the general history of colonialism and independence movements throughout Africa. In short, he discusses new states in the context of old societies and how the dynamic has made ripe an environment prone to dysfunction and sometimes failure. In this chapter, he also compares different colonial administrative histories (British, French, Portuguese, and Dutch) to outcomes of their respective colonies and the successes or failures of colonial administration that might have contributed to varying types of colonial rule. Finally, China is brought into the discussion as the most recent influential external power in the region, a topic addressed at length later in the book.

Chapters Five through Eleven survey diverse African countries and discuss the characteristics of their cultures, peoples, politics, and histories. Beginning in Somalia, Dowden focuses on the homogeneity of the Somali people’s ethnicity and how it has fostered one language, culture, and common religion compared to other African countries such as Nigeria that are made up of hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages. The Angola chapter concentrates on the long history of the Portuguese in Africa and on the mixed-race communities that opposed imperialism, but which nevertheless identified more with Europeans than Africans. In the Senegal chapter, Dowden highlights the faith-based Mouride trading communities that have sprung up around the world and that support Senegalese both at home and abroad. Genocide and ethnic relations are the focal points of the Rwanda/Burundi chapter, and the chapter on Nigeria focuses on corruption.

In addition to the country survey chapters, *Africa* has chapters on issues such as HIV/AIDS, mobile communications, the Asian influence, and new African professionals. These issue chapters give insight to cross-regional development patterns and globalization's impacts on the continent. Perhaps the most interesting chapter is Chapter Eighteen: 'Phones, Asians and Professionals: The New Africa', in which the progress of the continent is highlighted and grassroots development is credited with many of the successes. The author criticizes somewhat aid agencies and politics as getting in the way of significant community development, but this chapter reorients the development conversation to show that successes in Africa are happening, and that it is largely a homegrown effort. The chapter on Asian influence is also a particularly interesting chapter that raises questions about the ability of governments such as China to establish relations with African governments based solely on trade. Can it be done, or is it just another form of colonialism?

Africa is a good read for people interested in a narrative related to development, history, culture, and politics on the African continent. This book is a general survey and is based largely on a journalist's experience over several decades and in many different countries. It is not data intensive, which makes it easily readable, but it lacks the rigorous analysis that students and academics would need for African research. The result is a solid but generalized volume on Africa that raises interesting questions for readers to pursue further.

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