

BOOK REVIEW: AFRICAN STUDIES IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND DEMOCRACY, EDITED BY MAHMOOD MAMDANI AND ERNEST WAMBA-DIA-WAMBA

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African studies is a multidisciplinary field that encompasses the study of the history, culture, politics and society of Africa. Social movements and democracy are two key themes in African studies, as they have been central to the continent's political and social development. It is against the above background that the book edited by Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba's 617 paged, African Studies in *Social Movements and Democracy*, published in Dakar in 1995 by Codesria, should be understood. The book has made a very significant contribution to the study of African political dynamics, focusing on the crucial role that social movements play in the democratization process across the continent. The volume, which has fifteen well-researched contributions, offers a deep and multidimensional look into how grassroots movements, rooted in local struggles for justice and equality, have shaped political landscapes in various African countries.

The book is structured around essays that cover a wide range of social movements and their impacts on democratization efforts across Africa. Through rich case studies and theoretical reflections, the editors and contributors explore how these movements, often marginalised in traditional political analysis, are essential to understanding the nature of African political transitions. The volume particularly emphasises "democracy from below," centring the experiences of peasants, workers, women and other disenfranchised groups. It opens with an examination of the broad role of social movements in Africa's political development, particularly in challenging oppressive regimes and advocating for democratic governance. The contributors argue that while state-centred approaches to democratisation often highlight the role of elites and formal institutions, it is the grassroots mobilisations that frequently drive the push for more participatory and just political systems. Social movements in Africa have often emerged as responses to political repression, economic exploitation, and social inequality. They are vehicles for expressing discontent and articulating demands for democratic reforms, particularly in postcolonial contexts where authoritarian regimes have dominated the political landscape. The essays highlight how these movements have operated in various spheres, from rural areas where peasants organise around land issues to urban centres where labour movements contest capitalist exploitation.

A key strength of this volume is its use of case studies from different African countries, providing concrete examples of how social movements have influenced democratisation. Countries such as Uganda, South Africa, Zimbabwe as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo serve as focal points for these analyses.

In South Africa, labour movements are explored as central to the resistance against apartheid and the subsequent democratization process. The country's vibrant

trade unions and civil society organisations are shown to be not just actors in a political struggle but also key players in shaping the country's democratic institutions. Uganda's complex political landscape is another focal point, with essays analysing how local resistance movements, especially during times of conflict, have challenged dictatorial rule and sought to create alternative political structures that reflect the aspirations of the people. In Zimbabwe, the role of peasant movements in land reform and political activism is examined, showing how rural-based social movements have had a lasting impact on national political discourse and reform efforts. These case studies illustrate the diversity and adaptability of African social movements, showing how they can emerge in response to different historical, social, and political contexts but with a common goal of transforming the political order in favour of greater inclusion and participation.

Politics The concept of "democracy from below" is a central theme in the book, especially as championed by Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. The contributors argue that democratisation cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on formal institutions like political parties and elections. Instead, the everyday struggles of ordinary people, peasants, workers, and women are the driving forces behind meaningful democratic change. Wamba-dia-Wamba advocates for people-centred democracy, which places emphasis on the agency of local communities and their capacity to organise and govern themselves. This challenges the traditional top-down models of governance that often dominate African politics, where elites maintain control of political and economic power. The book asserts that true democracy must reflect the needs and voices of these marginalised groups. It also critiques the external pressures that have shaped African democratization processes, noting how international donors and organisations often prioritise formal electoral processes over the empowerment of local movements, which results in fragile and superficial democratic institutions.

Several essays delve into the intersectional dynamics within African social movements, particularly focusing on class, gender, and identity. African social movements are not monolithic, and the book highlights how different groups based on class, gender, and ethnicity bring their own distinct grievances and demands into the broader struggle for democracy. The role of women's movements is prominently featured, showcasing how women have organised to confront both the patriarchal structures of society and the political power systems that exclude them. Women's activism is framed as a critical part of the democratization process, as it pushes for a broader conception of democracy that includes gender equality and social justice. Class-based analysis also features strongly, especially in discussions of labour movements and peasant uprisings. The economic disenfranchisement of African workers and peasants is highlighted as a key motivator for political action, with these groups often leading the charge for democratic reforms that address not only political but also economic inequalities.

The book also considers the international context in which African social movements operate. The influence of external actors such as Western Governments, international NGOs, and multilateral organisations is critically examined. The contributors discuss how these outside forces can both support and undermine African democratization efforts. For instance, international aid and diplomatic

pressure have sometimes helped push authoritarian regimes toward reform, but they have also imposed neoliberal economic policies that exacerbate inequality and limit the autonomy of local movements. The book further discusses the global connections that African movements have established with other social movements worldwide. These transnational networks have facilitated the exchange of ideas, strategies, and solidarity, showing how African social movements are part of a global struggle for democracy and social justice.

The strengths of the book is derived from the key factors which will be briefly discussed below;

The book's use of interdisciplinary perspectives, including political science, history, sociology, and anthropology, allows it to capture the complexity of African social movements in a way that single-discipline approaches cannot. This broad scope enriches the analysis and offers multiple lenses through which to understand social movements. The emphasis on grassroots movements and marginalised communities, particularly peasants, workers, and women, sets this book apart from other analyses of African democracy that often focus on elite-driven processes. This "bottom-up" approach is a refreshing and important perspective that highlights the agency of ordinary people in shaping their political futures.

The rich empirical content, drawn from diverse African contexts, is one of the book's greatest strengths. The in-depth case studies provide clear, grounded examples of how social movements operate and interact with political structures, offering valuable lessons for both scholars and practitioners interested in African democratisation.

In as much as the book has contributed significantly to the Social Movements and Democracy in Africa, there are some limitations in the work pertinent to be pinpointed, which include;

While the book provides deep insights into social movements in countries like Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe, it gives less attention to certain regions of Africa, particularly West Africa. Movements in countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, or Ghana are less thoroughly explored, which could leave readers wanting more geographic balance. First published in the early 1990s, the book does not cover more recent developments in African social movements, such as the rise of digital activism or the effects of the Arab Spring on North African countries. Readers looking for insights into contemporary African social movements may find the book somewhat limited in addressing more recent political phenomena.

The book is therefore essential for understanding the role of Social Movements and Democracy in African politics, edited by two of Africa's most prominent scholars, Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. The book provides a critical and well-rounded analysis of how grassroots activism has shaped democratization processes across the continent. Despite the fact that the book focuses mostly on historical and geographically selective topics, its insights into the dynamics of social movements remain highly relevant for anyone interested in African politics, democratisation, and social justice.