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## Africa

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### **Architecture and Politics in Africa: Making, Living and Imagining Identities Through Buildings**

Joanne Tomkinson, Daniel Mulugeta and Julia Gallagher, eds. Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2022. £25.00/\$36.95. 278 pp.

In *Architecture and Politics in Africa*, the contributors explore public buildings as sites where political identities, domestic politics and foreign relations are expressed and negotiated. Essentially treating public spaces as political texts, they examine not just the multitude of ways in which architectural spaces have been used as part of state-building projects, but also how they often take on alternative meanings that challenge the intentions of their creators. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, the volume reflects diverse methodological approaches and draws on different theoretical traditions in its analyses. The result is an empirically rich collection of cases, underscored by a sophisticated theoretical framework that allows for rich insights into power, agency, resistance and identity.

Showcasing the aims of the collected volume, Julia Gallagher and Yah Ariane Bernadette N'djoré explore citizens' understanding of the state in Côte d'Ivoire by examining popular discourses about the aesthetics of post-colonial state buildings. Focusing on a range of public buildings, including hospitals and presidential palaces, they show how these built spaces allow glimpses into the practices of statehood, in that they are places where policymakers make decisions that can enable or restrict the rights of citizens, and where ordinary people participate in state-making.

Innocent Batsani-Ncube uses the case of Chinese funding and construction of the Malawian parliament building to explore wider issues around China's influence in Africa. Treating the building not as an isolated act of benevolence by China, but as part of a larger phenomenon across Africa – Batsani-Ncube notes that, by the mid-2010s, China had financed the construction and refurbishment of 15 parliamentary complexes on the continent – the chapter delves into the motivations behind China's decision to finance and construct Malawi's parliament building. Daniel Mulugeta's chapter explores the Chinese-built African Union (AU) building in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and its ability to embody pan-African ideals. In conversations with officials and ordinary citizens in Addis Ababa and Abuja, he identifies tensions between different strains of pan-African thought, some emphasising formal, elite-led projects and processes of political and economic integration

of African states, and others popular conceptions of African unity. In employing architecture to explore how the interactions between objects, actors, institutions and structures enable and constrain the imaginative process of constructing communities, he shows how perceptions of the building reflect both the possibilities of pan-Africanism and the AU's failure to deliver on those ideals.

All the chapters encourage the reader to consider more closely the function of public buildings as sites for reinforcing or challenging certain identities and embodying particular aspirations around modernity or tradition. Overall, the book succeeds in making a persuasive argument for foregrounding architecture in any attempt to understand not only Africa's politics and international relations, but the interplay between state and society, and domestic and foreign politics more generally.

**Africa's Soft Power: Philosophies, Political Values, Foreign Policies and Cultural Exports**

Oluwaseun Tella. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.  
£38.99/\$52.95. 216 pp.

In this first book-length study of African soft power, Oluwaseun Tella focuses on the foreign policies of four key states: Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Starting with the argument that existing definitions of soft power do not sufficiently capture all the elements of African states' soft power, the author deliberately sets out to 'de-Americanise' and 'Africanise' the concept. The conceptual chapter, however, instead draws on the examples of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC countries), concluding that, in addition to the sources of soft power mentioned by Joseph Nye, who first coined the term in the 1980s, trade, investment and aid should be understood as integral to soft power. The link between the soft power of the BRIC states, the African case studies that follow and the Africanising of the concept is regrettably not sufficiently elaborated. In a separate section, what the author terms 'African philosophies' – namely Pharaonism, Harambee, Omolúwàbí and Ubuntu – are outlined as offering significant potential as soft-power resources. While the values (such as collectivism) that are embedded in these world views offer alternative ways of thinking about interpersonal relations, the nature of society, democracy and development, their link to soft power is speculative, and they are discussed as one of many potential cultural resources rather than representing any kind of overarching framework.

In light of the author's aim of Africanising the conceptualisation of soft power, it is surprising that there is no attempt to situate the study within broader debates in international relations (IR) regarding Eurocentrism and the applicability of existing IR concepts to the Global South. Some engagement with

relevant theoretical questions regarding the need for geoculturally specific concepts and theories, assumptions of difference and challenges to universalism, among others, would have positioned the study within the wider trend towards globalising IR. Despite the stated intention to move beyond Nye's definition, which is criticised for being based on the culture and liberal ideals of the United States, in the case studies the same elements that Nye emphasises (such as liberal democracy, the promotion of democracy and human rights) are used to assess the limitations of and decline in soft power of the states under discussion.

In all the chapters, the tension between the potential of culture to act as a soft-power resource and government policies (both domestic and foreign) comes to the fore. The strength of the chapters lies in Tella's attempt to explain the gap between the states' potential soft-power resources and their influence in international affairs. In particular, the sections on the constraints on the exercise of soft power make for an interesting overview of the respective countries' domestic challenges and foreign policies. While the philosophies are painted as having soft-power potential, some reflection on how they can also undermine it would have been useful. In the case of South Africa, for example, the government's stated commitment to Ubuntu in its foreign policy, emphasising a people-first approach and a sense of common humanity, often serves instead to highlight the inconsistency in its approach to global human-rights issues.

One of the main shortcomings of the book is its failure to clearly distinguish between potential sources of soft power (for example, in the form of cultural products) and actual soft-power projection. The result is that the chapters focus primarily on providing an overview of the cultural resources that these countries possess, without going into detail about how these are (or are not) translated into soft power. In addition, while the book provides interesting overviews of often under-recognised cultural resources and the multitude of constraints facing these states in exercising soft power, it does not succeed in its stated aim of Africanising the concept. Beyond being of academic interest, the book is also a reminder to African policymakers to pay more attention to the importance of soft-power resources as a strategic instrument in their foreign-policy toolkit.

**Africa's Global Infrastructures: South–South Transformation in Practice**

Jana Hönke, Eric Cezne and Yifan Yang, eds. London: C. Hurst & Company, 2024. £22.00. 313 pp.

Reflecting on the burgeoning literature on South–South relations, the editors of *Africa's Global Infrastructures* note that much of it is concerned with whether the emerging forms of cooperation between states in the Global South challenge the

Western liberal order and traditional development models. Instead of reinforcing perceptions of competition between different visions of global order, Jana Hönke, Eric Cezne and Yifan Yang prefer to use the term 'globalities' to refer to the myriad ways in which actors employ ideas and practices of the 'global' in their interactions. Emphasising the role of African agency in their examinations of Africa's South–South relations, the contributors provide analyses of a wide range of infrastructure projects that have resulted from Chinese, Brazilian and Indian engagement on the continent. Through in-depth empirical case studies of the entanglements between different actors, the authors show how ideas of the 'global' and of South–South relations are constantly being negotiated and transformed through a multitude of actors, processes and practices. Eschewing a state-centric, top-down approach, the emphasis is on practices taking place in large infrastructure sites (termed 'frontier zones'), including ports and railways. While the focus is on infrastructure projects, these are seen as being embedded in and reflecting a range of relevant relationships, and as also being, at heart, political projects.

The volume proceeds in three parts. The first includes chapters that explore the assumption that actors from the Global South, such as China, import models of development that challenge existing Western models. Raoul Bunskoek argues that there is in fact no definitive 'Chinese' model of development, and that, instead, alternative models are negotiated through interaction, suggesting a relational understanding of how new practices and orders emerge. The second part – which includes Jan Sändig and Jana Hönke's chapter on the role of advocacy groups challenging Chinese mining practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – centres on contestations, covering not just how African agency shapes the practices of Chinese, Brazilian and Indian actors, but also how civil-society groups in China, Brazil and India contest infrastructure projects in Africa. In the third part, on everyday entanglements, Elisa Gambino and Mandira Bagwandeem's contribution investigates labour relations in a Sino-African construction project, and asks whether and how Chinese labour practices are influencing infrastructure projects in Africa. In a thoughtful concluding reflection on the preceding chapters, Vineet Thakur encourages readers to eschew general analytical categories and to instead embrace the 'messy site of everyday encounter' (p. 223), with a view not only to drawing conclusions about the case at hand, but also to considering what broader theoretical insights can be gained.

In summary, *Africa's Global Infrastructures* goes beyond simple binaries of South–South cooperation as either challenging the Western-dominated global order or not, adopting a nuanced approach to exploring Africa's multiple

entanglements with external actors through the prism of infrastructure projects. It also makes a contribution, albeit sometimes only implicitly, to our understanding of Eurocentrism in IR theory, and the tendency to think in terms of categories such as African, Chinese, Western and so on – constructed distinctions which, as the book reveals, are blurred in practice.

**Africa Is Not a Country: Breaking Stereotypes of Modern Africa**

Dipo Faloyin. London: Harvill Secker, 2022. £16.99. 380 pp.

Written in a conversational style with a healthy infusion of humour, Dipo Faloyin's *Africa Is Not a Country* pushes back against what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has referred to as the 'single story' of Africa and its dangers, providing the reader with multiple and diverse accounts that address the persistent stereotypes of the continent.

By reminding us that Africa comprises 54 countries, 1.4 billion people and more than 2,000 languages, Faloyin reveals the absurdity of the notion that the same stereotypes of poverty, conflict and disease apply to the entire continent. Without being naive about the tremendous challenges that Africa faces – stereotypes usually have some basis in reality, though they tend to focus only on a limited aspect of the larger truth – he also tries to provide some context for complex problems that are too easily dismissed based on simplistic and essentialist narratives. In eight parts, he engages with an array of topics ranging from dictatorship to cultural restitution to jollof rice, all the while drawing on history and popular culture. For example, in a chapter titled 'The Birth of White Saviour Imagery or How Not to Be a White Saviour While Still Making a Difference', the author criticises the way in which the global aid industry fetishises images of poverty and disease with the aim of gaining support for its cause, and how charitable intentions can serve to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Using the 'Kony 2012' campaign, which sought the arrest of Ugandan militia leader Joseph Kony, as a case in point, he problematises the way in which complex situations are reduced to simple narratives. In other chapters he recounts often tongue-in-cheek anecdotes about authoritarian figures such as Somali dictator Mohammed Siad Barre and Libya's Muammar Gadhafi, and lesser-known political dynasties like the Nguemas of Equatorial Guinea, commenting on the role of Western powers in keeping these dubious characters in power. All this is done in an engaging, accessible style that is clearly aimed at a wider audience. The drawback of this approach is that, while the text is interspersed with bits of data and random facts, these are not backed up with references.

The discerning reader might question the utility of this book for policymakers and scholars in the field of security studies, but conflict and security are not separate from the everyday lives of people, nor from the perceptions of policymakers and publics that underlie international action, including humanitarian aid and intervention. Following Faloyin's line of thought, the international community's engagement with Africa continues to be driven by deep-seated, entrenched ideas about the continent. A consistent theme throughout the book is the way in which Africans have been deliberately sidelined from decisions with grave consequences for them, including the Berlin Conference of 1884. While this is true to a large extent, it can also be criticised for, in turn, overlooking the agency of African actors not only in shaping their own destinies but also in co-constituting the ideas and practices of the international system.

In the end, the book is perhaps less about challenging stereotypes and more about complementing the single story with a multifaceted portrait that weaves together history and popular culture.

**Kenya's Engagement with China: Discourse, Power, and Agency**

Anita Plummer. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2022. \$49.95. 244 pp.

Set against the background of China's increasing importance on the African continent, *Kenya's Engagement with China* provides an Africa-centred analysis that avoids the usual centring of China. While there has been a proliferation of studies on China–Africa relations, those focusing on China's involvement in individual states are still in the minority, and it is to this literature that Anita Plummer makes a contribution.

In her work on African agency in the context of China–Africa engagement, Plummer is particularly interested in the tension between state-sponsored narratives and the counter-discourse arising from the collective and individual experiences of ordinary Kenyans. Unlike much existing work on African agency, which tends to be mainly state-centric or focused on the role of individual leaders, *Kenya's Engagement with China* instead gives voice to ordinary individuals and civil groups, whose micronarratives were gathered by the author through interviews and from traditional media and online sources. She contends that recognising and understanding these competing narratives is important not only because it constitutes a meaningful form of citizen engagement, but also because it 'articulates an alternative vision of political development processes' (p. xxv) that could influence policy, including Kenya's foreign policy towards China. Perhaps surprisingly, her finding is that critiques

of Sino-Kenyan engagement are in fact more critical of the Kenyan government than of China.

The counter-narratives are set against China's public-diplomacy efforts and its strategies to influence public perceptions of Chinese engagement in Kenya, which are discussed in the first two chapters. These include an overview of the origin story of China–Africa relations promoted by official Chinese-government sources, which emphasises an 800-year history that is markedly distinct from the West's relationship with the continent, and, more recently, Afro-Asian solidarity. At the same time, it conveniently glosses over the contentious relationship between China and Kenya during the Cold War, during which then-president Jomo Kenyatta warned: 'It is naïve to think that there is no danger of imperialism from the East. In world power politics the East has as much designs upon us as the West and would like us to serve their interests' (pp. 15–16). Interestingly, the author finds that these historical framings have not influenced public discourse. The rest of the book examines critical reactions to top-down elite narratives on a range of issues, including industrial policy and trade, infrastructure, labour relations and employment, and environmental sustainability and justice. With regard to the latter, activists highlight the fact that while China is pursuing a green-development model at home, this same commitment is not reflected in its overseas activities.

Plummer draws on a rich array of sources including interviews, tweets, blog posts and music videos. By centring the agency of ordinary Kenyans, she shows how, in an era of social media, it is exceedingly difficult for state messaging and propaganda to remain uncontested. The book also makes clear that foreign policy is not separate from local realities.