



Africa Development, Vol. XXX, No.3, 2005, pp. 143–146

© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2005
(ISSN 0850-3907)

Book Reviews

Richard Werbner, 2004, *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana: the Public Anthropology of Kalanga Elites* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis).

Onalenna Doo Selolwane,
Department of Sociology,
University of Botswana.

The first thing that struck me as I was reading through Dick Werbner's very engaging book, was just how much he does in fact engage with local scholarship in Botswana. There are very few western scholars who recognize local scholarship to the extent that this author does in terms of meaningful debate and substantive citations of work produced by Botswana scholars. In this regard he stands in a class of his own.

The significance of the book is that it comes at a very timely moment when debate on identity and citizenship has been taken to the public arena as citizens engage in renegotiating terms of co-existence and the meaning of development and nation building. Werbner captures this when he observes that in Botswana such debate happens in the realm of 'peaceful politics where the accent is on negotiation. In that sense the book provides a much sunnier exposition of the ethnic identity debate than is the conventional wisdom where such debates are associated with violence and tend to indicate disenchantment with state formation rather than an affirmation of its legitimacy.

Werbner's book therefore departs from the norm by demonstrating the positive contribution of Botswana's elites in renegotiating state–society and interethnic relations for the common will. He notes for instance the role these mainly former public servants have played in checking corruption by founding a local branch of Transparency International and participating in commissions probing malpractice in the public service. He also highlights their role in attempts, through the discourse on ethnicity and cultural rights, to move the terms of state guarantee of human rights from exclusive focus on individuals to inclusion of group rights. But above all Werbner sets out to demonstrate very convincingly how ethnic identity formation among the elites he has chosen to focus on, is both inward-looking and outward-looking.

That is he argues that it reflects the nurturing of Kalanga identity among an inner circle of friends and associates which also extends to developing cosmopolitan associations with non-Kalanga in terms of family and marriage as well as business and professional relations.

The only contention I have with this book is that even where there is opportunity to do so, it does not make the slightest concession to any positive contribution from non Kalanga elites, particularly the contemporaries of the notables who are the main subject of discussion here. Werbner indicates from the outset that his position is informed by his own circumstances as well as his professional experience which derives from more than four decades of studying the Kalanga. But that notwithstanding, one stills feels that there are one or two areas in the book where he could have acknowledged the 'other' a bit more positively.

For instance in Chapter 3 of the book, only the extreme in the 'majoritarian position' is highlighted and this is captured as suggesting that Tswana see their own collectivity and its distinctive needs and interests as equal to the soul of the nation. What is missing here is a recognition that the source of some of the disquiet against minority demands a) is very specifically identified with Kalanga identity and b) with the simple statistic that while Kalanga account for an estimated 11 percent of the population they have historically accounted for up to 30 percent of the top decision-making positions in the public bureaucracy (including the administration of justice) as formerly expatriate held positions became localised. This is one factor that brings nuance to the inter-ethnic debate and often puts wind in the sails of the 'reactionary backlash' from the Tswana majority, including members of other minorities. Secondly, the book tends to position Tswana ethnicity as a given, and does not problematise its historical invention and rise to the status of a national language.

Otherwise this book is vintage anthropology and lives up to the post-colonial wisdom it promises and from which it derives its depth and breadth as well as great sense of humour. It is divided in two parts: the first charts the role of citizen elites, minorities and bureaucrats in negotiating power; while the second part traces the rise of one particular individual, Gobe Matenge from humble beginnings to public man and 'reasonable radical'.