Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1990, pp.340.

African peasants have come a long way. Gone are the days when they were casually dismissed by self-righteous anthropologists as 'primitive', indolent and passive 'tribesmen'. There were of course none of these things. Historians have done much to demonstrate that peasants in the precolonial era did not live in the isolated 'tribal' enclaves of the ethnographic model. They were integrated in complex ways to wider economic and political systems, which rose and fell, expanded and contracted. In short, they lived in porous communities and a world that changed. And their actions contributed to those changes. This book affirms that it was colonialism and anthropology which invented 'tribes' as discrete spatial units and ethnographic objects. Unfortunately, Feierman contends nationalist historians threw out the baby of local culture together with the ethnographic bath water.

He argues that local society need not be abandoned as a unit of analysis, or turned into nothing little more than examples to validate general principles or to demonstrate transformations in the wider world. But the solution does not lie in simply changing the image of peasant society, but in adopting a new analytic approach that breaks the artificial spatial and temporal boundaries in which peasants are enclosed. By looking at local rural society as peasant society, these societies begin to lose their character as insulated ethnographic specimens, for peasant societies were almost by definition, local societies linked to the wider world. Feierman seeks to reconstruct local peasant culture in what was the Shambaa kingdom in Tanzania in the last century and a half. But he is not merely interested in presenting a prosaic historical narrative of how peasants constructed and reconstructed their lives. His primary objective is to examine how peasants conceptualized their world, 'to explore', as he puts it, 'the relationship between the historical context in which peasants, as historical actors, found themselves and the way in which they created and recreated political discourse' (p.13).

This, then, is a story of peasants as actors and thinkers. Feierman argues that Eurocentric and elitist conceptions which define intellectuals by the quality and content of their discourse have long blinded us to the existence of peasant intellectuals in non-literate societies. He adopts Gramsci's definition of intellectuals, while rejecting his analysis of the peasantry, as people who are engaged in socially recognized organizational, directive and educative or expressive activities. The peasant intellectuals earned their living from farming, but at crucial historical moments, they organized political movements and elaborated new forms of discourse. Peasant intellectuals mediated between practical and discursive knowledge, local society and the

wider world, domination and public discourse. The discourse of the peasant intellectuals centred on the well-being of peasant society, articulated in the political language of healing the land (*kuzifya shi*) and harming the land (*kubana shi*), terms which, Feierman believes, expressed and exposed consent for, and dissent against, the policies and practices of the rulers. However, Feierman fails to demonstrate convincingly that these two terms were the core terms of peasant intellectual discourse. The linguistic evidence presented is too thin for such a major conclusion. The effect is that the scope of peasant intellectual discourse appears excessively narrow, and strangely frozen for a study that is determined to be historical and shed anthropological timelessness. It is a discourse confined to the politics of royal power. The only new forms of political discourse appear in the 1950s when peasant intellectuals, he tells us, debated the nature of *demokrasi*.

For a study on peasant intellectuals we learn little about peasant ecological ideas. Peasant ideas on droughts, rains and rainmaking presented in this book are imbued with the ritual mysticism of anthropological analysis. An opportunity was missed to chart out peasant ideas on the environment, nature, the cosmos, and humanity's relationship to them, and whether, when, how, and why these ideas changed. It is ironic for a book that seeks to extricate peasant intellectual discourse from the onerous weight of ethnographic research that we do not hear much from the peasants themselves. Their voices are drowned in the circumlocutions of discourse theory. Most of the oral research for this study was conducted in the 1960s. All the author seems to have done is to reinterpret the data in the light of the new theory. Nothing wrong with that. The only problem is that we learn little about what the peasant intellectuals actually thought.

Another problem with Feierman's analysis is that it is not clear who these peasant intellectuals really are. For the precolonial era he includes the specialized healers, specialized officials at the royal court, and the king's chief minister and representatives, while for the colonial period the peasant intellectuals include the chiefs, because, in his view, they had now become, according to the Gramscian definition of intellectuals, 'the dominant group's deputies', as well as what he calls the peasant-clerk-teachers and functionaries. The issue is not that the composition of peasant intellectuals changed, but that he stretches the definition of "peasant" to the point where it becomes a blanket to cover all rural dwellers and their offspring. The definitional difficulties are shown by his use of the hyphenated categories.

This is to suggest that the book fails where it ought to succeed or where the author hopes it makes a contribution. The sections discussing the peasant intellectuals are tedious and have a convoluted quality to them. Far more successful and interesting are the chapters discussing the process of peasant production and resistance. Chapter 2 examines the patterns of peasant surplus appropriation and dependency in late nineteenth century Shambaai,

singling out the organization of the tribute system, forms of personal dependency, gender division of labour, and strategies for ensuring food security. Part of Chapter 4 discusses shifts in the system of dependency and the roots of political power and the nature of peasant resistance on the eve of colonial conquest. The next few chapters elaborate on the question of peasant resistance during the colonial period, which increasingly focused on the chiefs, thanks to their willingness to implement unpopular colonial agricultural and conservation policies, concretized most sharply in the Usambara Scheme introduced in 1950.

The struggle against the Usambara Scheme, which required peasants to increase agricultural productivity and control erosion by building ridges, was led by women. This is the subject of Chapter 8, perhaps the best chapter in the book. Peasants, especially poor ones, most of whom were women, resisted 'building ridges on subsistence land because this would convert it into men's cash-crop land unavailable for flexible seasonal land loans and unavailable also to people poor in land' (p.182). Thus the scheme threatened the flexible use of land, the guarantee of subsistence to the poor, and intensified the pressure on women's labour time. What Feierman does not say is the extent to which the scheme was seen as a threat to indigenous conservation ideas. For a study claiming to be an examination of peasant intellectuals one would have expected such an analysis. Also, while Feierman pays tribute to peasant women as the leaders of the protest movements in the 1950s, which he sees as the heroic age of the peasant intellectuals during which they tried to create an alternative discourse (a subject examined in Chapter 9), he says little about women as peasant intellectuals.

The last two chapters (9 and 10) on the post-independence period deal with the elimination of chieftaincy and the steady marginalization of the peasant intellectuals and their discourse and the triumph of the salaried elite, whom he sees as descendants of the clerks of indirect rule. The new elite forged its own discourse couched in the language of development, and articulated in the idiom of ujamaa. But beneath this seemingly egalitarian ideology lay the interests of a bureaucratic class trying to establish its hegemony. This analysis may not be entirely new, but it is refreshing. Indeed, the weaknesses noted above notwithstanding, this book is a valuable contribution to the study of African peasants. If nothing else, it shows that peasants were not the 'rural idiots' Marx thought they were. They could think. Of course the peasants themselves knew that. But academic researchers did not. Now they know.

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