FSS Welcomes the *Africa Review of Books*

Book reviews have been for long a vital component of academic and professional journals. Indeed, some journals have been prized as much for their reviews as for their articles, the former often occupying up to 50% of the space. Subsequently, a genre of publication has developed dedicated primarily to the review of books, interspersed with critical and analytical essays. One has in mind such celebrated publications as the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*. More recently, *Biblio*, published in New Delhi, has come to represent an Asian (or Southern) counterpart vying with the established metropolitan Reviews for depth and analytical rigor. Evidently, the book reviews in such publications are more substantive and critical than those in the standard academic journals.

Up until recently, the review of African books has been the primary responsibility of journals of African studies based in Europe and the United States. One has in mind, among others, journals such as the *Journal of African History*, *International Journal of African Historical Studies, Journal of Modern African Studies*, *African Affairs*, or *African Studies Review*. More recently, Michigan State University has introduced a more extensive electronic review network through its H-Net Reviews.

While these journals and electronic media have done a commendable job of introducing and evaluating publications on Africa, they have suffered from two deficiencies. The first is the minimal participation of African academics in the reviewing process. The second is the relatively low coverage of books published within the continent itself, either because they fail to attract publicity or because they are published in African languages. *Africa Review of Books* is designed to redress this imbalance. *ARB* hopes to bring to the attention of a wider audience books published by young and promising African scholars as well as seminal works by veteran academics and writers. Moreover, it proposes to give prominence to the African voice that has hitherto been barely audible in the discussion of books on Africa and to dispel the Afro-pessimism that has become fashionable in some Western circles. Accordingly, most of the contributors to the *Review* are intended to be African scholars both in Africa and the Diaspora.

Moreover, *ARB* aspires to transcend the disciplinary straitjackets that have circumscribed most academic book reviews. It is intended to traverse traditional disciplinary boundaries by hosting reviews on art, literature, theater, film and the media as well as the established disciplines in the social sciences broadly defined. It is our hope that the *Review* will provide a forum for the broadest possible coverage of works on Africa as well as critical and in-depth discussions around works of seminal importance, thereby fostering a vibrant intellectual climate and a culture of debate around African development issues. Works to be reviewed will include a broad range of publications ranging from the portrayal of daily life to changes of continental and global significance.

Emanating from this broad mandate, the *Review* will have as its audience primarily the scholarly communities concerned with Africa, both inside the continent and abroad. These include academics, researchers, graduate students and writers. In addition, the *Review* also targets the non-academic audience with strong interest in Africa. Included in this category are policy makers, non-governmental and civil society organizations, the donor community, and the general reading public.

The Forum for Social Studies is proud to have been selected to host what is intended to be a forum for the critical review and analysis of publications on Africa. Although FSS has been concerned largely with national affairs, it has always viewed these within the broader continental context. This has been made possible by the long-standing association of its leadership with continental and sub-regional research networks such as CODESRIA and OSSREA. The hosting of *ARB* draws FSS even more into the continental orbit. It is a challenge for which we feel the experience of the last six years has prepared it adequately. It is a calling to which it responds with no illusion of the hard work involved but also with a determination to give the best and the utmost of what it has. For this is an initiative that addresses a long-standing need and realizes the dream of the African social science research community.

While we are prepared to give all, we do earnestly hope that we will also get the reciprocal support of the academic and research community concerned with Africa as well as the non-academic groups and individuals for whom this initiative marks a turning point in the critical discussion of African publications and African issues. The success of such a venture depends as much on the widest and most active participation of the audience as in the dedication and hard work of the editorial staff.

Forum for Social Studies