

Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling

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Reviewed

by

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One of the fundamental challenges in the study of "Africans" and "African politics" has been the construction and applicability of theories and theoretical frameworks that best suits African localities and political realities, a "political theory of Africa," the likes of *negritude*. There is no doubt that those who have taken up the challenge and continue to take up the challenge, have done so through predominantly "borrowed" Eurocentric and Western theories and theoretical constructs, essentially, what Patrick Chabal in *Africa: the Politics of Suffering and Smiling* describes as the "orthodox approach to studying Africans and African politics." In this thought provoking and daring piece, Chabal poses a riveting challenge to this orthodox approach by proposing that Africanists and other scholars of Africa step outside the orthodox terrain of studying the continent as part of the discourse on "agency."¹

In light of this debate invitation, Chabal uses a nuanced "anthropological" approach to subjectively and objectively discuss contemporary issues of African localities and political realities that in his own words, best *marks human existence in contemporary Africa*. Thus, the book is organized in the following manner, the first three-*Being, Belonging* and *Believing*-map out the core dimensions of "African" life, the pillars of identity and sociability.

The next two chapters on *Partaking* and *Striving* address the question of how individual Africans manage the political and economic opportunities and constraints with which they are confronted. The last two chapters, *Surviving* and *Suffering*, tackle the difficulties Africans face in their daily lives and the resources they deploy to overcome them.

In his discussion on the *Politics of Being*, Chabal grapples with the question of what he calls *being*, by which he means the place and role of individual Africans within the environment in which they are born and live. He engages this issue by looking at three aspects of *being*: *origin*, *identity*, and *locality* that make up the *Politics of Being*. With *origin*, he makes the point that in Africa, the places of birth and burial (the two being linked) matter greatly for a number of pertinent religious, cultural, and sociological reasons. Regarding *identity*, he suggests that questions of identity in Africa are directly linked to the politicization of ethnicity and the universal development of tribalism, and goes on to discuss the pre-colonial and post-colonial evolution of ethnic identity as it has impacted African localities and African politics. In his discussion of *locality*, Chabal touches on the relevance of locality to politics by focusing attention on those aspects of the relationship between ‘community’ and ‘individual,’ *gender*, *age*, and *authority*. These three aspects, he says, play an important role in an individual’s social position within an African community. The second chapter focuses on the *Politics of Belonging*.

Chapter 2 touches on the *Politics of Belonging*. Chabal discusses in his own words, somewhat Western terms of what the meaning of individual existence is, doing this, through the notion of *belonging*. The *Politics of Belonging*, according to Chabal, comes with some key issues. These issues pertain to the hostility between ‘natives’ and ‘strangers’ or, in current Francophone parlance, autochthony against allochthony. He teases out these key issues of the *Politics of Belonging* from three different angles, in terms of *kin*, *reciprocity*, and *stranger*. In the question of kinship, he makes the point that the ‘weight’ or burden of relatives defines the limits and margins of *association* and *obligation* amongst African localities. In light of the *reciprocity* issue, Chabal makes the point that in day-to-day socio-economic and political life, kinship translates into structures of reciprocity, which governs inter-personal and intra-communal relations based on the nature of (political) *exchange*, the meanings of (political) *representation*, and the byways of (political) *accountability*. The second chapter concludes by recognizing that the *Politics of Belonging* raises the question of the politics of non-belonging, the issue of who is a ‘native’ (autochthon) and who is a stranger (allochthon), which are at the center of the struggle for power at both local and national levels. These previously mentioned issues are part of dimensions Chabal claims have had a clear influence on politics since independence.

Chapter 3 focuses on the *Politics of Believing*, the idea that what an African person is and how he or she *belongs* to the various groupings that come to make him/her an individual are conditioned by the belief system within which people make sense of and conduct their lives. This *Politics of Belonging* is entrenched in the construct of religion. Chabal says that *morality*, *rationality*, and *agency*, are all aspects of African religious experiences that are rarely discussed by Africanists political scientists. Essentially, he moves to challenge what he perceives to be *narrow and ethnocentric visions of Africa* by examining the relationship between three of the central components of African religion, *tradition*, and *obligation*.

The point of Chabal's approach to *morality* was to stress the multi-structured nature and complexities of African religion. Chabal then proceeds to make a blunt charge about rationality in Africa, saying that in Africa, imported religion either *adopts or they shrivel*. On the issue of rationality, Chabal argues that *rationality*, [according to the West], is the *application of logical reasoning to a political realm that rests on the virtue of the collective social good and the morality of the reciprocity that binds rulers and ruled in highly hybrid form of political accountability*. Such is the Western understanding of *rationality*. Chabal boldly asserts that such a Western understanding of *rationality*, when applied to the *African Politics of Believing*, is likely to appear 'irrational' to Westerners. Wrapping up the chapter discussing *agency*, Chabal suggests that Africans are fitted into a pre-existing mould; that their agency is pre-determined.

Chapter 4 is centered on the *Politics of Partaking*. It tackles the conventional notions of Africa and Africans as static. Specifically, it analyses the ways in which individuals in contemporary Africa *partake* in politics, by "partake," he means the both simultaneous partaking and making use of, a notion intended to convey the complex relationships between individuals-within-groups and the world of politics and politicians. Chabal basically conveys what the power dimensions are between the powerful and the powerless, the rulers and the ruled, the politicians and the populace, covering the themes of *subject*, *client*, and *citizen*. In his discussion of the notion of *subject*, Chabal retraces the evolutionary applicability of the word in an African context, from the pre-colonial era, to the colonial period, and finally, post-colonial Africa. *Client* and *clienteles* partakes in Africa were also reviewed from the pre-colonial era, to the colonial period, and the post-colonial era. To account for the Westphalia notion of citizen that's also central to partaking in politics in Africa, Chabal makes sure to address the fact that while Africa has had historical experiences with dealing with its peoples as subjects and clients, much of Africa partakes in politics through the reinvigoration of Africans as citizens.

Chapter 5 is on the *Politics of Striving*. It centers on the politics of economic activity, from the perspective of ordinary Africans. The chapter challenges the "blackened" image of African markets, by this, I mean, the orthodox view that the predominantly informal markets of Africa are not "real economies." Chabal reminds readers that the only reason why informal African markets are not formal or "real economies," as perceived, is because much of the nature of the informal markets "cannot be taxed," nothing more or nothing less. There is also a thorough look into the meanings and dynamics of labor, trade, and rent-seeking. Chapter 6 takes on the topic of the *Politics of Surviving*. The central themes in this chapter are the *in-formalization* of politics and the informal economy, which is said to be driven by *networking* and *migratory* activities of Africans on the continent. The final chapter, the *Politics of Suffering*, illumines what Chabal considers the three acute forms of *suffering* on the continent, *violence*, *conflict*, and *illness*. To Chabal, these three forms of *suffering* are all interrelated. *Violence* is perpetuated by appalling individual leaders and the state apparatus, often times, leading to the crippling dehumanization of African peoples and their communities, detaching them from society. This dehumanizing violence are said to breed increasing *conflict*, as youth become disillusioned with the ideals, norms, and values of their localities that once humanized them. *Violence*, in combination with *conflict*, is pronounced to have adverse affects on the proliferation of *illness* on the continent.

The overarching conclusion that Chabal makes is that without the intrinsic scholarly understanding of the politics of *being, belonging, believing, striving, surviving, and suffering* in Africa, one would continue to capture African localities and political realities with the same Eurocentric and Western theories and theoretical frameworks that he describes as the orthodox approach to studying Africa. Overall, Chabal makes a compelling argument in drawing attention to these orthodox limitations of studying Africa. As he emphasizes the peoples of the continent are too diverse and complex to be boxed into potentially irrelevant theoretical constructs. There is no doubt that over the years, that is exactly what the orthodox approach to studying Africa has done, it has boxed the continent into Western oriented theoretical constructs that have narrowed and limited intrinsic understandings of the region. This piece is worth reading because Chabal challenges his fellow Western scholars, which he directs most of the blame, to reconsider their past ethnocentric and sometimes racist approaches to studying the peoples and communities of Africa. This is important because some of the best scholars on Africa are indeed Westerners; highly influential and often times more privileged than other “native” Africanists in securing publication resources. In order to achieve intrinsic scholarly understanding of the politics of *being, belonging, believing, striving, surviving, and suffering* in Africa that Chabal proposes, the change must begin with those most influential and privileged in the field, Western scholars. My only concern, as I’ve personally addressed to Dr. Chabal, is “what is the take home message for the academy at large? Because clearly, the academy has a lot to do with the proliferation of these “orthodox approaches” to studying Africa and Africans for it is they who “train” the scholars of the field, Western or native, therefore, it would play a decisive role in the construction and application of “theories that best suit African localities and political realities.”

¹ For discussions on the “discourse on African agency” see Molefi K Asante. *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

