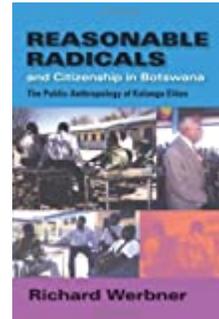




Richard Werbner. *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana: The Public Anthropology of Kalanga Elites.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 280 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34402-1.



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Is There Hope Against Afro-pessimism?

In *Reasonable Radicals*, Richard Werbner attempts the complicated task of challenging particular representations of Africa. There is a growing body of literature that has painted mainly the negative side of Africa: the political violence; tyranny; misgovernance, the looting, by those in power, of state resources and so on. Out of this research developed such concepts as the “failed state,” “vampire state,” “kleptocracies” (greed governments), etc. Werbner believes that this perspective, termed Afro-pessimism, has been blind to “African concerns for the public good” and the popular quest for accountability and good governance (p. 1). Consequently, the author advocates the need to rewrite the current Africanist agenda. The challenge, he believes, lies in a new critical public anthropology which, with the increasing democratization of some African states, would “illuminate the unexpected ? transformations that are taking place in post-colonial Africa” (p. 2). Nevertheless, this new agenda is neither the relentless glorification of Africa (evident in earlier Africanist paradigms of the 1960s) nor the excessive attacks on Africa from either the “criminalization of the state” hypothesis or the “politics of the belly” scholarship that has overshadowed postcolonial social and po-

litical theory.

Reasonable Radicals is an analysis of the relations between Botswana Kalanga minority elites and the Botswana state. Unlike in some other countries where minority elites may be seen to be secessionist or even political and economic saboteurs helping to make their states ungovernable, Kalanga elites are seen by Werbner to be reasonable. While at one level, these elites hold strong views about Kalanga ethnic identity and Kalanga culture, and maintain strong home ties, they do not deploy this ethnic agenda against the state. They are at the forefront of nation building, from their days as top civil servants to their time as post-civil servants and company executives. As public servants “emeritus,” they are still invaluable to the Government for their wisdom; hence, they continue to act as “consultants” and at times as active participants in commissions and other affairs. They often become controversial, not for promoting political tribalism, but in their fight for transparency, justice, and in enhancing efficiency in the way the Botswana government must run. Through public forums and elite-dominated informal meeting arenas, they

discuss and critique government policy and chat about development-related agendas for the nation. In this manner, Kalanga elites create an open society in which the capable Botswana government is conscious of scrutiny and always seeking to govern its people better.

The book has two sections. Section 1, which deals with aspects of citizenship and the negotiation of power, has six chapters. Part 2, which the author titles “The Rise of the Public Man,” has three chapters and an epilogue.

Chapter one (“Postcolonial Wisdom”), like the introduction, is conceptual and continues to set the scene for the author’s work. It also tells us about the rise of Botswana from being the second poorest country in the world to its current much more prosperous position (p. 19). Nothing short of the term “capable state” would better describe Botswana. This chapter emphasizes the internal critique of the state by leaders who often meet in an informal forum where they find themselves discussing one another. This first chapter also briefly explains the importance of what the author terms “The Post Civil Service” in big business; a group that can be characterized as government’s wise men, often consulted at crucial times because of their experience and reputation. These people end up working as a check against current civil servants, keeping “social memories of good governance alive” (p. 27). Though they have this national agenda, on the one hand, such Kalanga elders also have their own ethnic groups at heart, notwithstanding their tendency towards what the author calls “cosmopolitan” and “permeable” ethnicity in which ethnic “others” are potential marriage partners, business friends, and so on.

In chapter 2 (“The Minorities Debate”), the author deals with the problem of “ethnicity and nationalism.” While in other countries the relationship between minorities and those in the majority is often characterized in terms of opposition—such as, for example, in either causing civil wars and other forms of violence or, more generally, in what Lonsdale terms “political tribalism”—Werbner sees a special relationship between the minority Kalanga and the majority BaTswana. Their relationship is characteristically one of a “changeable negotiation of opposition and cooperation, sometimes through a deliberate co-opting of potential enemies” (p. 35); one that transcends differences. This assertive, but conciliatory version of being Kalanga is, according to Werbner, more a postcolonial phenomenon than a remnant of the old pre-Protectorate and Protectorate “tribal traditions” (p. 3). This new identity seems to the author to be a factor of postcolonial state policy. The state embarked on

a process of “Tswanification,” a One-Nation-Consensus which defined all its postcolonial citizens as BaTswana–Kalanga and other minority groups included (pp. 38–39). National citizenry became more important than tribal belonging, and by opening up tribal lands to all citizens, tribal citizenship as a basis for exclusive land rights was eliminated.

The author admits that the terms under which tribes were integrated into the postcolonial state discriminated against them, and as he rightly points out, acknowledgement of this discrimination is a contribution to the debate on minority rights. If the author admits that such feelings of frustration or feelings of discrimination did exist, especially among minorities, then he could have better informed his readers by analyzing these features more critically instead of just glossing over them in his determination to thwart Afro-pessimism. If he had worked in this way then he would not have reached the almost polar opposite viewpoint of Solway, a historian who worked on the same subject and concluded that the Botswana nation, contrary to the picture that it has of a nation trying to downplay ethnic allegiances, is in fact a “site of struggle” in which the marginalized desire to reconfigure the basis of their exclusion and those at the center want to hold their place.[1]

The debate on minorities flows into chapter 3, where Werbner discusses “The Politics of Recognition and ‘Pressure Groups.’” In this chapter Werbner shows how, by defining ethnicity in the modern sense, by intellectually denying any belonging to a “tribe,” and by denying any “super-tribe” building project, radical Kalanga elites facilitate struggles solely for “cultural rights” rather than mix cultural and tribal questions as would other extreme minorities that are less well advantaged. Questioning the basis of tribal power, which they mock as colonial creations, such assertive elites want to see the end of chiefly control over territory (p. 52). This attempt by Kalanga elites to curtail chiefs’ powers led to the creation by the BaTswana of a conservative pressure group, “Pitso Ya BaTswana,” that aimed at maintaining “tradition”; the status quo. This emergence of Tswana counter activism must have led, in response, to the emergence of a radical Kalanga elite-backed Kalanga Cultural Society (SPIL: Society for the Promotion of Ikalanga Language) that the President of Botswana feared as harboring political motives. Brilliantly argued as it is, the author’s contention that Kalanga struggles were merely cultural does not seem convincing enough. The political motivations of Kalanga elites are insufficiently analyzed. For instance, it is possible that Kalanga elites’ disdain for

paramount chiefs was an attempt to undercut Tswana traditional political dominance over issues of land and rural politics, the dominance of which kept Kalanga politically powerless. Unfairly enough, the author is careful not to pursue such an argument. He only sees these attempts by Kalanga elites to debase traditional authorities as a move to counter tribal discrimination and an attempt to publicize a multicultural agenda.

But more than being preoccupied with local “cultural rights,” these elites have a wider view of identity: they believe in a “cosmopolitan ethnicity”—that comprise interethnic cooperation and mutuality—and are nation-oriented entrepreneurs (chapter 4). This is Werbner’s most sophisticated and interesting chapter. He believes that cosmopolitan ethnicity arose as a factor of minoritization (the national process of making minorities) in which minorities were actively differentiated from majorities, yet transcending those differences, being permeable (p. 64). For instance, one can be a prominent advocate of cultural rights yet also become an active participant of a wider, national association, or marry into the other super-tribe, or even partner an ethnic “other” into big business. What is also significant here for wider scholarship is Werbner’s view of “permeable ethnicities.” Drawing on the model of “permeable ethnicities” from historian John Lonsdale, who saw permeable ethnicities as a development of the pre-colonial period, where identities were less rigid than in the colonial period,^[2] Werbner, in opposition to Lonsdale, denies history to Botswana permeable ethnicities (perhaps as one would naturally expect from some anthropologists). Werbner believes that these Botswana ethnicities are “contemporary realities of the post-colony, not pre-colonial by-gones” (p. 68). Consequently, Werbner falls into the same extreme problem as Lonsdale. A study of a longer period of Kalanga history would reveal possible interaction and exchanges between ethnic groups since the pre-colonial period and this, to me, seems to have continued in the colonial period. My research on Kalanga-Ndebele relations in Zimbabwe has yielded fruitful evidence of pre-colonial ethnicity.

Werbner also has an interesting view of “cross border” ethnic relations between the Kalanga and Tswana of Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively which seems important to his work, albeit this is only briefly mentioned in the book. He concedes that these relations have a considerable history that other researchers should perhaps examine. While cognizant of this “international ethnicity,” Werbner nevertheless argues that the Kalanga’s prime allegiance is to the Botswana nation, rather than

to this other identity. This could well be the case, but readers would have benefited from an analysis of what specific features created such a nationalist character in those minorities when in other parts of Africa such minorities often became secessionist. Does the capacity of the state and the elites’ reasonableness alone sufficiently explain this trend? To this question, Werbner gives a partial answer; that the Kalanga, being so much in control of the economy, are a significant “Other” for the Tswana majority.

Only in chapter 5 does Werbner begin a detailed analysis of the Botswana state. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: first, to develop the notion of “a capable state” whose officials (especially the President, his Adviser and the Attorney General) meticulously managed their “blunders” and restored public confidence. Secondly, to discuss the role of reasonable Kalanga elites (especially Skelemani, the Attorney General) in state building and in managing such blunders without making it a “tribal matter.” Werbner praises Skelemani for his ability to compromise even when odds were against him. The “blunders” that Werbner talks about are as follows: they started with the 1999 elections where ballot irregularities would have lost about sixty thousand voters from the roll. President Mogae, aware of this irregularity, declared a state of emergency in which he recalled parliament in order to validate the nearly lost votes into the new voters’ roll, and he also apologized to the nation. In 2001, Mogae made another blunder. There was a Referendum meant to amend the Constitution to restructure the country’s courts and judiciary. Unfortunately, the original phrasing of the Constitution was awkward and did not arouse most people’s interest. Because of this “blunder” the referendum was postponed “at the last minute” and despite a countrywide campaign, less than 5 percent of the people voted. Apparently afraid of the past “blunder,” Mogae appointed an adviser to his office, blundering again by not consulting the Attorney General Skelemani over the appointment of this lawyer. The adviser was an experienced lawyer who, however, had little knowledge of government practice. Another blunder was the appointment of a commission, called the Khumalo Commission, led by a South African lawyer, Khumalo. It was a one-man commission in which, as well, the Adviser to the President gave himself a post of “Commission Secretary.” The Commission was appointed to investigate the circumstances around the drafting of the referendum. Unfortunately, the integrity of the Commission was questionable from the start and, with time, rumors spread that the President’s adviser had “stitched up the findings

in advance.” Some “findings” against the Attorney General created chaos. Consequently, Skelemani launched a High Court challenge against the Commission. He also even sued the President in his personal capacity for the tarnishing of his personal reputation and loss of monies during legal battles in courts against the Commission. On the other front, the Pitso Ya BaTswana a BaTswana ethnic-based pressure group, were calling on the Attorney General to resign, falsely claiming that a “Yes-vote” in the Referendum was his creation designed to legitimize Kalanga domination in the judiciary.

Matters governmental had turned ethnic. Meanwhile there was the issue of having to postpone the Referendum. Skelemani wanted the Referendum to continue. In light of the chaos which threatened national unity, Skemelani managed the fiascos by private discussions with the President. He then agreed to postpone the Referendum “in the spirit of unity and progress” (p. 100). Skemelani also opted for an out-of-court settlement of his scores with the President. Interestingly, Werbner suggests that both the President and the Attorney General were wrong, but he seems to cast Skelemani as most reasonable in trying to contain the problem. This seems to suggest perhaps that the author relied on one side of the story and left that side which would have portrayed a different version of Skelemani in this blunder.

In chapter 6 (“Land, Clients, and Tribal Bureaucrats”) the author pursues the theme of “the state.” He looks at the impact of national policy on “the local state” (the community level). With the establishment from 1968 of Land Boards in Botswana, especially in the Tati area formerly administered under loosely organized Kalanga chiefs, rural political centralization began. However, fearing that this centralization benefited Tswana chiefs like Ramokate, some Kalanga elites such as Gobe Matenge strongly resisted the process. Nonetheless, since the “ideology of development” inherent in the Land Boards helped bridge the “cultural opposition” to these bodies, this led to the participation of Kalanga and Tswana alike in the Boards, with the result that these organizations developed into a truly local bureaucratic system. The Boards developed into powerful patrons dealing harshly with its defenseless local citizens. By taking over control of land from the chiefs, local citizens became clients of this new bureaucracy.

For Werbner, a book is incomplete if it does not address “the spiritual” and “the dead.” In chapter 7 (“Bringing Back the Dead”), the author analyzes the complex interactions between Kalanga elites and their rural patriar-

chal superiors. Since the power of the patriarchs in assuaging misfortunes and disasters is thought to be given, and their memory trans-local (going beyond their locality), Kalanga elites from urban areas migrate home to revitalize themselves. In the process, they submit as “juniors” to their elders who are, as part of moral economy, held and hailed as the “living dead,” wielding the capacity to speak for the dead. But, curiously, Werbner notes that the acceptance of junior-ness by the elites is itself an assertion of their belonging to the Kalanga moral community. The ideology of “belonging” is an important point for Werbner; it illustrates the fact that Kalanga elites’ reasonableness is not only to be understood in terms of their dealing with the state, but also in terms of its situation within the local community order.

In chapter 8 (“Public Officer, Public Officer Emeritus”), Werbner focuses mainly on Gobe Matenge, a company director, shareholder in many companies, and an ex-civil servant. The career of Gobe Matenge illustrates one important point for the author: that it is possible among Kalanga elites to have forceful views about their ethnic identity and community rights and at the same time believe in building the nation through constructive criticism and through advocating political pluralism. Werbner depicts Gobe and other Kalanga elites as “an alternative force, an agent for the expansion of the public sphere through opening it out to many organized lobbies” (p. 159) All that Werbner does is to reproduce Gobe’s views about himself, without analyzing his source. We are therefore left wondering what other independent sources would have said about Gobe; perhaps he would then not have been so portrayed in the way Werbner depicts him.

The story of Gobe Matenge continues in chapter 9 (“The Making of a Reasonable Radical”), an important chapter, which shows how Gobe was once a Civil Servant who led the Botswana Civil Service Association, a trade union which acted as an alternative public forum to discuss the problems that civil servants collectively encountered in their dealings with Government. Even before then, he was a leading member of the group of ten young multiracial public officials that discussed, from the mid-1950s, the need for an independent Botswana. Gobe’s forum became even more critical of the abuse of state resources and failures of ministers. This brought him into conflict with officials, especially the president, who thought he harbored political ambitions. Werbner’s aim in this story is to demonstrate how the “capable state,” from Seretse Khama to Masire, dealt wisely with a person who could have been labeled an enemy. Indeed the two

presidents continued to support him, notwithstanding his outspokenness. Even in retirement, Gobe remained an active opposition member, in the Botswana National Front.

The author's last chapter is an epilogue. It summarizes the author's arguments.

I am sure this book is going to be very popular with readers, both the African public and their politicians who are tired of bad publicity (even in scholarly texts) and academics who are dissatisfied with "the politics of the belly" hypothesis. Nonetheless, some aspects that the author raises in the book need clarity. Firstly, the theme of cosmopolitan ethnicity is mentioned only briefly yet, in my view, it is an important theme that could have been thoroughly investigated. There is, for instance, the issue of the recent repatriation of the bones of Chief Nswazvi to Botswana from Zimbabwe as well as the relocation of his people. What implication has this for ethnicity and nationalism in Botswana and, indeed, what might such events mean for understandings of citizenship in general? An interesting related fact is the continuing influx of immigrants from Zimbabwe, some of them Kalanga from the Zimbabwe-Botswana border who, incidentally, have Kalanga relatives in Botswana and are currently creating an oral memory that justifies claims to a pre-colonial Botswana citizenship. The role of this new Kalanga Diaspora in Botswana Kalanga politics and society is not covered in the book. Are they citizens of Botswana by history or members of a Kalanga ethnic group lacking citizenship, or neither of these? Secondly, one wonders if the reasonableness of Kalanga radicals has not been overemphasized. With the exception of Gobe Matenge's account, Werbner's work seems, in most cases, to portray Kalanga elites as having been more reasonable than the state. It would seem that their reasonableness has been exaggerated and the capacity of the state to deal with their situation minimized. One also wonders if the reasonableness of these Kalanga elites would perhaps have been less appreciated in a different, less capable state.

I first came to know the author's works some years ago when I was an undergraduate student. My favorite book by Richard Werbner is *Tears of the Dead* (1991), which has a chapter on the Matabeleland atrocities in Zimbabwe. I have come to respect the author's originality, his groundbreaking works and theoretical formulations, which not only impress anthropologists, his primary field of specialty, but also address a wider audience of readers, from political scientists to historians. His sim-

ple writing style also endears him to interested parties in the non-academic world. Similarly, *Reasonable Radicals* is a highly original work, which will no doubt attract the attention of academics in African studies, anthropology, history, and politics and is likely to be popular as well in a number of African State Houses for its "seemingly" apologetic style. Nevertheless, how far it defeats, or at least offers an alternative to Afro-pessimism remains to be seen.

All in all, the work is an interesting attempt to provide an alternative to Afro-pessimism. One cannot say that it successfully deconstructs that perspective. It would take many more years of similar scholarship to change the minds of Afro-pessimists. Yet, they still have such vampires and such kleptocrats to write about. Some of governments in Africa are even getting worse; and, incidentally, some of these governments are geographically close to Botswana where Werbner researched. However, the book is enlightening in its call that we have a new paradigm shift in the way we write about Africa.

Notes

[1]. J. S. Solway, "Reaching the Limits of Universal Citizenship: 'Minority' Struggles in Botswana," in *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, eds. B. Berman, D. Eyoh and W. Kymlicka (Oxford: James Currey, 2004).

[2]. J. M. Lonsdale, "Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism," in *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism, Occasional Paper No. 1*, eds. P. Kaarsholm and J. Hultin (Roskilde: International Development Studies, Roskilde University, 1994).

[3]. It seems that Werbner uses the term "tribe" and "tribal" in the old negative sense, to apply to groups that maintain hostility towards each other whether generated by colonialism or pre-colonial encounters. It is not clear if by "tribe" he means "ethnic," which might also be probable. Lonsdale, the scholar whom he criticizes in the second chapter, uses the concepts "moral ethnicity" and "political tribalism" to describe and delineate changing African identities between the pre-colonial and colonial period. It is now less conventional to use the term "tribal" save where it is clearly clarified. But in the same chapter Werbner uses the phrase "tribal lands," most likely in the sense of "Tribal Trust Lands," meaning generally "African Communal Areas" controlled by the "head of a tribe," especially a Chief. One would therefore conclude that Werbner uses the term "tribe" loosely and interchangeably to mean a number of things such as the old colo-

nial definition of an ethnic group; a political identity im- community under a chief, etc.
plying political animosity between Africans; an African

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