



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Local Governance in Africa: The Challenges of Democratic  
Governance (review)

Arthur Abraham

African Studies Review, Volume 48, Number 1, April 2005, pp. 217-219  
(Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2005.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/186017>

house arrest and traveled to Stanleyville [Kisangani] to establish a new government and a new army. Lumumba's government began to gain increasing influence throughout Congo" (115). In fact, Lumumba never made it to Kisangani. On December 1–2, 1961, he was captured at Lodi (on the left bank of the Sankuru River), flown back to Kinshasa, and placed in the custody of his worst enemies, Katanga officials, who eventually murdered him—with Belgian and American complicity—on January 17, 1961 (see Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* [Verso, 2001]).

In spite of these flaws, *Pan-African History* is, overall, a timely addition to the African biographical literature, and it will be of particular interest to Africanist researchers and students of pan-Africanism and of African political thought. It is hoped that the problems and deficiencies identified above will be duly corrected in subsequent editions, and that a second volume will eventually be added to address the key issue of inclusiveness.

Guy Martin

Winston-Salem State University  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

**Dele Olowu and James S. Wunsch et al. *Local Governance in Africa: The Challenges of Democratic Governance*.** Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2004. x + 310 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$58.00. Cloth.

The postcolonial period witnessed a remarkable tendency toward political centralization in Africa, but the economic and political balance sheet generally showed up in the red. As economic and political crises, compounded by increasing urbanization, engulfed the continent by the 1970s and '80s, African states were forced to look for solutions elsewhere. International financial institutions, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, foisted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) with their now notorious "conditionalities" as a standard reform package. Donor pressure also began to mount for "good governance," with an emphasis on decentralization. The shift to local governments was also expected to reduce central government expenditures. These reforms were fraught with weakness because of the failure to differentiate between deconcentration and devolution as forms of decentralization. "Local governance," as such, did not result. The new phase of decentralization that began in the 1990s is termed "democratic decentralization" by one of the authors in the volume under review: while maintaining several old features, it includes the possibility of developing "local governance"—participatory institutions responsible to local communities.

The mixed fortunes of decentralization measures lead the contributors to ask under what circumstances viable systems of local governance can emerge. This is the central theme of the book. Governance at all levels poses challenges, but in the end, "the national political context is critical"

(267). From the case studies presented here it is possible to see a clear correlation between the level of support and genuine desire for reform at the center, and the degree of success achieved in the localities. Success at the local level is measured by two broad criteria: first, the extent to which local priorities and needs drive local decision making; and second, outcomes, that is, tangible benefits in terms of services provided as well as the intangible benefit of “empowerment.”

According to the authors’ “theory of local governance,” local governments must have a defined area of reasonable size and population, have requisite authority and resources, be open to wide participation, and be capable of making decisions and holding themselves accountable to their population. The framework for these requirements issues largely from central governments. But even where the national political context is supportive, local governments still face serious problems with scarcity of money, difficult communications, poverty, and primordial cleavages based on ethnicity, language, or religion. In this situation, the success stories are those countries that have been able to navigate the frontiers of these problems and sometimes even take advantage of them. Democratic decentralization does not mean that local governance is automatically achieved.

Efforts to address some of these problems have led to the quest for alternative structures of local government. These have, of necessity, focused on the indigenous institution of chieftaincy. Traditionally ubiquitous, chieftaincy was used as an instrument of local rule by the colonial powers. In many newly independent states it was, as a consequence, looked upon with suspicion and actually abolished in some. The institution refused to go away, however, mainly because it has historically been the agency for managing resources at the local level. Thus “retraditionalization” is forcing many countries to deal with chiefs while trying to increase the participation, accountability, and modernization of local government. The authors show how “both traditional leader and community can grow in power”; the challenge “is not overpowering indigenous institutions, but learning how to build on and with them” (22).

Perhaps I ought to mention at this point one thought that has constantly occurred to me apropos of the Western push for democracy, especially in poor countries. Historically speaking, democracy was a consequence of the industrial development of the West, and yet curiously we now see the West trying to reverse a historical logic by insisting that democracy be the cause of development. The cart seems to be placed before the horse. Does this explain the failures? Political and governance reforms may need to engage this contradiction as a matter of practical and theoretical discourse, which may help modify and make more realistic what we are all trying to do.

This book is unequivocal about the challenges that face local governments in Africa, but it is also unequivocal that the prospects are not hopeless. To be sure, there are failures arising from the center, as in Kenya or Sierra Leone (which is not covered in the book). But varying degrees of suc-

cess have been registered, depending upon how the problems that face local government have been handled. At the higher end are countries like South Africa and Botswana and at the lower end are countries like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, while countries like Uganda exemplify middle ground successes.

The book is an indispensable guide for all African government ministries handling local government reform. It will also be useful to other practitioners in the field, such as nongovernment organizations. Students in various disciplines dealing with development and contemporary Africa will find it interesting as well.

Arthur Abraham  
Virginia State University  
Petersburg, Virginia

**Nigel Eltringham. *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*.**

London: Pluto Press, 2004. xv + 232 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$24.95. Paper.

Based on interviews carried out for doctoral research in Rwanda 1998 and in Europe 1999, Nigel Eltringham's *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda* deals with the discourse on responsibility for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and on the binary construction of Rwandan society. He focuses on six debates that prove to be crucial for the understanding of how absolutist ways of picturing Rwandan society made the genocide possible, and he dedicates a chapter to each of these debates.

Chapter 1 deals with ethnicity and the dangers of using ethnic categories without reflecting on how they are constructed in specific cases. The author points out that racial construction of social distinctions and the belief in a universal definition of ethnicity lead to an image of Rwandan society, as well as the targets of the genocide, that is far from the objective. The following chapter analyzes the use of the phrase "social revolution of 1959" in explanations of what happened. According to Eltringham, this is merely a metonym for a divisive racial understanding of Rwandan society, one that distracts from an examination of other major events that represent the actual roots of the 1994 genocide. Chapter 3 investigates attempts to compare the 1994 genocide with the Holocaust, as well as the use of human rights terminology. Measuring the genocide against the Holocaust, rather than against the United Nations Genocide Convention, constitutes an inadequate application of Western standards, which minimizes other genocides and leads Rwanda to take a defensive position. Chapter 4 deals with collective guilt and its connection to the term "Hutu moderates." The subject of chapter 5 is the culture of impunity. Eltringham insists that in order to put an end to the culture of impunity, *all* human rights abuse allegations have to be investigated, not only genocide cases, so that unproven allegations cannot be transformed into sources of division. Chapter 6