

## Book Review

Seifuddin Adem, *Africa's Quest for Modernity: Lessons from Japan and China, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG (2023) pp. 269 (+xvi)*

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The volume under review draws from noted scholar Ali Mazrui's definition of modernisation, which integrates epistemic advancements with capability-based arguments. It looks to East and Southeast Asia as models for Africa's development. As he states in his introduction, Africa 'has to be able to conscript both China and Japan' in service of its developmental goals (p. 5). He argues that 'Africa can partner with China and learn from Japan' while being cognisant of the diversity of developmental paths in East and Southeast Asia.

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The first core section of the volume under review discusses the relevance of China's developmental paradigm for Africa. Imaginatively, the author counters Western 'Sino-pessimism' by suggesting that the Chinese development paradigm may in fact be more relevant to African needs, because China and Africa can be characterised justly as vast agglomerations of peoples and cultures 'masquerading as' states.

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Ensuing chapters within the first section concern themselves with Chinese intentions towards Africa. Advising ample caution in accepting over-credulous 'Sino-optimistic' narratives, the author argues that China can display primarily two kinds of agency that could realise the optimists' expectation. The first envisages Beijing as an impartial arbiter that can potentially 'encourage genuine ethnic power-sharing in Africa' (p. 44), which could help negate the unfortunate partition imposed on the continent in 1899. The second holds that Beijing could help African states access the corridors of

power in both existing as well as emerging international organisations.

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Turning to Japan in the third section of the volume, the author engages in a thick analysis of Japan's education and political systems in order to unearth 'software' that he deems critical to Africa's developmental path. A thorough analysis of Japan's education system leads him to the conclusion that that country's modernisation had as much to do with the retention of its traditional cultural norms as with adoption of Western technology. He further infers that Africa, which he argues is over-reliant on Western political-economic ideologies, would do well to pay attention to cultural factors as well.

The author's analysis of political governance and power transition within Japan guides him to the conclusion that Japan's history of 'revolving-door' politics, wherein Prime Ministers seemingly rotate terms annually, is testament to the fact that peaceful transfer of power is so institutionalised that actors within the party system do not hesitate to relinquish it. He states that this 'political recycling', as he calls it, implies a positive-sum calculation by elite actors that they still have a place within the system even if they step down from positions of actual authority. This is positively contrasted with African countries' propensity to dictatorship, which he argues is driven by zero-sum calculations.

The volume as a whole is a laudable initiative, insofar as it represents an autochthonous African effort to develop a development model that can realistically be implemented across the continent. From a programmatic perspective, there is little to criticise; indeed, the author's deep engagement with Ali Mazrui's work is critical to his project. His choice of East Asian models is also redolent of his deep personal engagement with the region.

If one must criticise any aspect of the volume under review, this critique must take the shape of two distinct threads. The first can be quickly dealt with. The structure of the volume is not well-thought out, and chapters and parts do not follow logical succession. As a result, points overlap, discussions are repeated and sections of certain chapters jar within the part structure. Relatedly, the author ends up using too many theoretical paradigms and inventing too many neologisms, especially in the latter half of the volume. This makes it difficult to follow the skein of his arguments for any length of time.

The second critique is more substantial. This reviewer does not use the word Orientalist lightly, but certain parts of the author's analysis do reek of it. One key example may be sufficient here. The author is keen to credit groupism as a key feature of Japanese education, which he traces uncritically to deep-rooted cultural origins. This attribution not only negates the long history among the Japanese people of resistance to the authority of the group, it also risks essentialising current differences in Japanese society, which seek to maintain varying degrees of distance from its invisible tyranny.

A related concern is the author's overreliance of groupism as an explanatory factor in Japanese

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success. He vastly underestimates the importance of environmental factors in shaping Japanese societal choices. Residing in a terrain devoid of significant natural resources and plagued by population-destroying natural calamities, grouping instincts have exerted an evolutionary logic on the Japanese people, who were forced to cooperate in order to eke out an existence. On the contrary, Africa's 'resource curse' positively encourages the kind of zero-sum calculations the author sees as a negative in the continent's politicians. While Japanese politicians can afford to be positive-sum given the paucity of shared resources, Africa's resources do not lend themselves to such generosity. Culture, in the sense he uses

it, thus may not be very relevant in changing behaviours, barring the disappearance of the environmental imperative.

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Another critical factor that ought to inhibit Japan's suitability as a development paradigm for Africa is that Japan, unlike Africa, is not 'a conglomerate of formally differentiated units with immense variations'. It has never

developed the set of tools necessary to accommodate ethnic differences domestically, as is plentifully evident in its disastrous policies toward not only the Ainu and the Okinawans, but also towards Asians during World War Two and migrants today. As a result, while Japan may successfully implement 'political recycling', this process is incumbent on the suppression of ethnic difference. Seen in this light, the author's initial formulation may be rephrased to reflect a better set of models: Africa must 'partner with Japan and learn from India (and China where relevant)' in order to achieve development that is egalitarian while being accountable to genuine inter-ethnic linkage.