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Book Review: Transformational Leadership in East Africa: Politics, Ideology and Community

Jerry M. Mwagbe
Kennesaw State University, jmwagbe@kennesaw.edu

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Since James Macgregor Burns coined the term transformational leadership in 1978, leadership research has been flooded with articles and other publications that emphasize the qualities of this form of leadership. Despite this growing abundance of literature dealing with transformational leadership, one would be hard-pressed to find books that do justice to this concept within the realm of African political leadership. When Reul J. Khoza published his book, Let Africa Lead: African Transformational Leadership for 21st Century Business, critics considered his work groundbreaking because it discussed a unique concept of African leadership juxtaposed with a Western concept. Similarly, Eric Aseka's Transformational Leadership in East Africa: Politics, Ideology and Community represents a groundbreaking analysis of "political power and the role of leadership in the African community." Aseka argues that unless leaders develop commitment to ideals and visions that represent the consensus of the entire community, effective leadership will remain an illusion. He adequately supports his claim by analyzing all the factors that should come to bear when discussing the question of African leadership in general and East African leadership in particular.

In the first chapter, he presents the philosophical lens through which the book discusses power. He recounts theories of ideology and power as presented by Gramsci, Althusser, Marx, and other leading Western philosophers and political and social theorists. In the first chapter, he succinctly presents all the claims that underlie the analyses he makes throughout the book. In chapter 2, he presents a historical perspective of leadership issues in East African communities and introduces transformational leadership as the mechanism that can effectively resolve the confrontation emanating from the social conflicts that exist in these
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societies. Chapter 3 discusses the types of leadership that existed during the colonial period and further expounds the concept of the “triad of consciousness,” which argues that there is interconnectedness between the human spirit, soul, and body. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the notion of “interpellation” and Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony and state power” using the Althusserian concept of the problematic. Against this background, Aseka raises pertinent questions regarding several of the respectable theories that relate to the study of “leadership, culture, religion, power and the state.”

In chapters 6 and 7, Aseka reviews postcolonial leadership in the East African region by examining the politics and the subjects of leadership during the postcolonial period. He also discusses the historical, ideological and cultural forces that contributed to the failure of postcolonial governments throughout the East African region. In the next two chapters, he provides his readers with compelling examples of how these forces affected postcolonial governments by discussing several prominent political figures in the region, some of whom led the fight for national independence in their respective countries, including Julius Miserere, Jomo Kenyatta, and Milton Obote.

Aptly titled “Which Way East Africa,” the final chapter of the book dwells on all the social and political theories that form the theoretical framework of his exposé. Aseka offers his conclusions about the leadership problems of the region and puts forth some prudent recommendations for leaders and future leaders in the region. First, he suggests that women and youths have leadership potential that is very important for the future of the communities in East Africa. On the issue of the eradication or minimization of poverty in the region, he proposes that current approaches to solving the issue of poverty must be redefined and aligned with the specific needs of the poor. Factoring in corruption, public choice theory, and federalism as contributors to the level of poverty in the region, Aseka concludes that there is need for Africa to reinvent herself through the “social reproduction of leadership culture.” This task in his view will require a visionary leader who can adopt the right ideology that the whole community can accept. Such an ideology must combat corruption, emphasize education, shun laissez-faire leadership, and embrace transformational leadership, because it has a positive link to the concepts of “teamwork, trust building and short-term goal eradication” and can also serve as the basis for achieving the highest standards of “good governance.”

Aseka’s book is intellectually aggressive and to a great extent multidisciplinary. It is indeed a milestone that must be respected and celebrated by African scholars across disciplines. While it is evident that Aseka employs historical ethnographic methodologies, the comprehensive discussion of social and political theory cannot go unnoticed. To his credit, he provides enough background for the
audience (regardless of professional leanings) to understand his claims. When he utilizes East African communal concepts, he provides non-Africanist readers the context so that they easily understand.

In a world that constantly questions the ability of African leaders to provide systems of good governance, Aseka's work represents a rare breed of African scholarship that will eventually prove that traditional African concepts of leadership, community, and social action are just as good as those from the West. This is a great book and a recommended reading for anyone involved in teaching or studying about African leadership problems.