Listening to Africa: Developing Africa from the Grassroots
Pierre Pradervand
New York: Praeger, 1989. xii + 229 pp. N.p.
Rural Communities under Stress: Peasant Farmers and the State in Africa
Jonathan Barker
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. ix + 228 pp. N.p.
African Food Systems in Crisis, Part One: Microperspectives
Rebecca Huss-Ashmore and Solomon H. Katz, eds.
New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1989. xiv + 339 pp. $54.00 (cloth), $29.00 (paper)

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These three books are all, in different senses (and with very different degrees of success), "about Africa," and they raise the basic question as to whether it is possible, in the 1990s, to write about this vast, diverse and troubled continent, in one volume. In examining each book, I will be asking how representative it is, how illuminating on areas others than those directly described and how valid are the inevitable omissions. Can one write on contemporary Africa without analyzing, for example, the disintegration of several states, especially the collapsing regimes of the Horn?; the 20 million people who are at risk of dying from hunger?; or the insidious threat of AIDS? To ask such questions is not to suggest that the story of Africa is contained in newspaper headlines, but to consider to what extent generalizations are possible, and in which areas.

Pradervand's book is concerned with village self-help groups that are trying to "express the maximum potential" of the people and thus to aid development. The author spent several months, mainly in the Sahel (Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso) with shorter visits to Zimbabwe and Kenya, visiting 111 villages and meeting men (and some women) who are attempting to help their own people help themselves. In many ways this is an inspiring story, and provides some encouragement in the generally rather bleak picture of development in African countries. But some nagging questions remain: although Pradervand recognizes that the groups he met "represent the *avant garde* . . . and are probably atypical," he does not adequately allow for this bias and gives what is almost certainly a quite skewed picture. For example, he mentions a few men who have given up salaried posts in order to return to their villages and help their people, but how many men have actually done this?

Pradervand also has problems with his perception of "traditional African culture" which at times is seen as fairly static, at others as having collapsed in one generation (p. 76) and in other places as something which should be blended skilfully with new elements; reminiscent of the missionaries who were described by Mary Kingsley a century ago—"they think that people are like water-pots, you can pour out the old water and pour in the new." The text contains many examples; "sharing and giving" are all-important (p. 209); "the elderly are an object of respect" (p. 211); "African village society is a gerontocracy"—these are not valid generalizations for most of contemporary rural Africa.

However, the author does recognize some "weak points" (pp. 110-111 and Chapter 12, "Achilles' Heel"), although he is too inclined to accept at face value what people

say. What is needed, instead of a rapid tour of 111 villages, is a detailed and in-depth study of a few communities, to arrive at a meaningful analysis of self-help efforts. There is not enough attention to the influence of the state and of other external factors; there is little indication of the often increasing gap between rich and poor, even in rural areas. Many books "on Africa" exclude individual farmers; this one reverses the process and largely excludes external influences. But there is a refreshing emphasis on such matters as the need for local empowerment, on the value of self-reliance, on the significance of vitality and resilience and on the impressive creativity of African farmers. There is also a welcome recognition that modern governments have to accept some responsibility for the present depressing conditions, and that not all ills can be blamed on colonialism. Despite my criticisms, this book is a useful antidote to some of the unrealistic macro-analyses, full of gloomy and largely invalid generalizations. Pradervand does provide chatty and authentic examples of African farmers who are succeeding in helping themselves and their communities; much more is needed, of course, than sporadic local efforts, and at least here are some positive stories from rural Africa.

Barker's book presents a contrast, as it is a more systematic account by a political scientist of relations between peasant farmers and the state. This covers mainly anglophone countries, particularly East Africa, Ghana and Nigeria, and includes several valuable case-studies. (As an aside, I prefer the term "low-resource farmers" to "peasant farmers," because the latter has many connotations that may not apply to Africa). The book is clearly set out in such a way that it would make a useful text book for undergraduates, especially as a supplementary text. While recognizing the diversity (both sociological and ecological) of African farming communities, Barker also notes the common features (p. 42), emphasizing rapid social change, and the accompanying "pain and destruction" (p. 23).

Barker presents several effective models, such as the three distinct functions of production, consumption and reproduction" (p. 52), but I doubt if some of the older models retain any validity today: see, for example, reference to David Apter's comparison of Baganda and Ashanti in 1965, or Samir Amin's models of the 1970s, both of which seem now to refer to another era. Barker rightly examines closely such basic problems as limited dialogue (between government and farmers), repression, survival and, he notes, the "striking disintegration" (p. 19) in countries like Zaire and Uganda—today, one could add several more to that category, alas.

Although the author notes that "centralized schemes have a miserable record" (p. 206), he also refers to the despotic and exploitative acts of colonial governments" (p. 152). Is it not time now, generally 30 years after independence, to put colonialism in a less emotive light? And is Tanzania really a good example of a "politically more successful government in Africa" (p. 208)?

As an anthropologist, I should have liked this book to have been more informed by anthropological insights—I counted 7 anthropological references out of nearly 130, and these days we all need to take account of the perspectives and conclusions of other disciplines. Nevertheless, Barker is aware of the complexity of political organizations in rural Africa, and his book does provide a good succinct introduction to a confusing scene.

I turn now to the volume edited by Huss-Ashmore and Katz, which is probably the most successful of the three under review, in that it has precise objectives, which are clearly and elegantly realized. Huss-Ashmore's solid (10 percent of the total) introduction, "Perspectives on the African Food Crisis," admirably sets the scene, with a comprehensive and insightful review of current explanations of famine and drought. She shows the complexity of the problem, considering the interplay of environmental,

historical, biological, sociological, economic and political factors. She analyzes approaches that emphasize research on farming systems, nutrition, the household, or climate, or the macro-economic scene, concluding that "the long-term alleviation of food stress . . . will undoubtedly require many different approaches" (p. 33).

The next section, "The Context of Food Stress in Africa," consists of six essays. Michael Glantz writes of "Drought, Famine and the Seasons," with assured competence, drawing on the work of others (such as Robert Chambers) and repeating the editor's emphasis on the complex nexus of political, economic and physical themes that must be considered. He concludes that "drought is not the primary source of the African agrarian crisis" (p. 68). Anyone interested in finding out more about hunger in Africa would do well to read Glantz's essay and Huss-Ashmore's introduction, as between them they offer a masterly overview of what is a most complicated situation. (Glantz includes operational definitions of famine, reminding me of my impatience, as a young colonial administrator in Handeni, Tanzania, 40 years ago, when government regulations precisely defined the degree of human misery that transformed a food shortage into a famine; I now have a better understanding of the need for such official rules and provisions.)

J.A. Mabbutt and Brian Spooner each has a chapter on desertification. The former provides a comparative overview, again stressing the wide range of relevant factors, including decreasing rainfall, increasing population, economic decline and political strife; he estimates that by the year 2000 there will be potentially critical conditions in the rainfed croplands (p. 109). Both Spooner and Mabbutt are critical of PACD (the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification) and Spooner offers a broad historical perspective on the topic; he, too, states that "desertification is first a social and only secondarily an ecological process" and sees the solution as being "to reintegrate the marginalised populations into the larger social process, and of marginalised nations into the international community" (p. 153). Spooner cautions environmentalists on overstressing the physical aspects, and ignoring social ones, and rightly places poverty and marginalization at the centre of his argument.

The last section of the book, "Strategies for Coping with Drought, Hunger and Famine," comprises six essays. I concentrate on Anne Fleuret's chapter on "Indigenous Taita Responses to Drought," as this well illustrates the themes echoed by other contributors, most of whom are anthropologists with a deep knowledge of one particular African rural community. Fleuret describes the traditional drought-management strategies of the Taita of Kenya, using excellent data obtained from nearly 100 households, all of which included children under six years of age. She was concerned with nutritional stress, and with risk management and the exploitations of ecological variability. The Taita had many strategies, including the sale of labour, of livestock and of fuelwood and charcoal. Fleuret shows the importance of hard data in supporting her arguments, and she—and the other contributors to this section—adequately demonstrate that (in Fleuret's words) people "who are working to develop long-term solutions to questions of drought and food shortage in Africa *have much to learn from villagers* [my italics). . . . [We] must all recognise the contributions of indigenous responses, both traditional and modern, to the resolution of such problems" (p. 236). These truths, so self-evident to those of us who have spend any time in rural Africa, are often overlooked by the planners and others and need constantly to be reiterated.

This volume on African Food Systems is highly recommended to anyone wishing to learn more about what is already a major world problem, and which shows no signs of going away.