

Peter D. Little, *Somalia: Economy Without State* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003). 206 pp., \$ 22.95 paper. ISBN 0-253-21648-6; \$54.95 cloth. ISBN 0-253-34362-3.

The above book is the latest in the African Issues series published by Indiana University Press. Not unlike books of its genre, Peter Little's focuses on a single issue: the realities of Somalia are stateless (or government-less, as he some times calls it) economy. However, unlike its peers it goes beyond simplistic descriptions and explanations of country problems. Employing a comparative anthropological perspective, the author cleverly situates the Somali experience in the wider African and Third World context. In these countries, where the law and public policy are terribly skewed against modern trade and commerce, he suggests, there is no distinction between official/unofficial, legal/illegal economies. Accordingly, the rules of the "game" are half observed by the public and half enforced by authorities. This "half-status" (p. 5) milieu, as he calls it, characterizes the Somali economy, as it does in other parts of the Third World.

By linking the Somali experience with those of other countries, the author rendered the Somali situation a little more intelligible. His "half-statuses" is characteristic of what Fred Riggs (1969) had referred to as "prismatic society." According to Riggs, prismatic society is an intermediate society which occurs at various points in the continuum of development, i.e., between tradition and modernity. In such a society, the line between what is formal/informal and legal/illegal is blurred. As Little put it: "Thus, what represents legal or illegal (official and unofficial) trade is negotiable and contingent (p. 7)." "Even without a government," he goes on to add, "it may be more accurate to view the Somalia economy as an extreme entry along a continuum of formal-to-informal (or legal-to-illegal) commerce rather than as a distinct case. It is a question of degree not difference (pp. 8-9)." This is why corruption and other improprieties are rife in these countries. The Somali society furnishes a typical example.

Three general themes permeate throughout the book, i.e., informal economy, social trust, and stateless order. By cross-connecting these themes in novel ways, the author accounts for the seemingly anomalous nature of Somalia's economy. Given the absence of government and modern financial institutions, he suggests, the country's economy could not have been any different. In situations of "not war-not peace" one can only expect a "not official-not unofficial" economy. This is even more so in the border regions, where fledgling state institutions have to contend with by deeply-entrenched, robust social order. "In environments like this," he contends, "distinction between formal and informal or official and unofficial are simply meaningless, even where recognized forms of government exist (p. 165)."

Somalia: Economy Without State talks also about social trust as the value that underpins informal trade in the country. Speaking on the subject, Francis Fukuyama noted that no economy, no matter its nature or size, can function without social trust (2000: 258). The experience of livestock traders in this region, which is the central

theme in the book, is the most telling in this regard. “Historically,” says Jamil Mubarak, “Somali herders provided credit directly to livestock exporters through negotiated arrangements (1997: 2032).” In the border area it is social trust that lubricates the wheels of livestock trade. Working through a network of kin and marital relationships, Somali traders buy livestock on credit from herders. Without this trust, the book makes it clear, this vital economic sector would have been impossible.

According to *Somalia: Economy Without State*, informal trade had also produced new social relations. During the state era (1960-1991), the port cities of Kismayo and Mogadishu commanded the gateways to lucrative foreign markets. Since they hosted financial institutions and modern communication facilities, they had exerted a strong pull on international trade. In this period, the circles of social relations spawning from overseas trade were circumscribed, as political cronies and the president’s clansmen dominated the business. However, after the fall of the national government in 1991, these cities had become highly contested, and, as a consequence, lost their commercial importance. Subsequently, local merchants shifted their businesses to the border towns like Afmadow, where they worked out complex social relations that tied together different clans residing in different ecological areas as a trading community. Not unlike what Robert Bates (2001: 33-35) had observed about the Kikuyu in Kenya, the Somali merchants in this little border town struck new social ties with people from different ecological settings as far as the Benadir Coast. Since people in different ecology rear different animals and crops, the residents of Afmadow insured themselves against social calamities and vagaries of nature, such as drought and pestilence.

In conclusion, the collapse of the Somali state had generated so much academic interest in Somali affairs. The break up of such a genuine nation-state as Somalia provoked serious discourse among students of this country.

In the ensuing intellectual fervor, new perspectives were introduced and old ones revised. Like so many post-state books, Peter Little’s contains old information about Somali society and economy and introduces new ones. Its strength lies, not its presentation, but in its area of study—i.e., the cross-border trade between Kenya and Somalia. Prior to the publication of this book, research on the region’s economy was few and far in between. As a significant player in the national economy, the area should have received more attention that it did until now. In this regard, Peter Little’s book is timely.

The author of this book tried and successfully managed to introduce to us the intricacies of Somalia’s stateless economy. He had done so in a manner that informs and excites the average reader about the subject. He has cleverly brought together the economic and social forces that presently hold the Somali society together. These he said include informal economy, social trust and traditional political order. “In essence,” he says, “they are what allow rural and urban populations to survive dismal formal economic and political circumstances (p. 5).”

References

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