



Prosperity in rural Africa? Insights into Wealth, assets, and poverty from longitudinal studies in Tanzania

edited by Dan Brockington and Christine Noe, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, 464pp., \$36.99, ISBN: 978-0-19886-587-2

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BOOK REVIEW

Prosperity in rural Africa? Insights into Wealth, assets, and poverty from longitudinal studies in Tanzania, edited by Dan Brockington and Christine Noe, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, 464pp., \$36.99, ISBN: 978-0-19886-587-2

The book is remarkably rich in detailed empirical studies, with mainly ethnographic and anthropological approaches, from a large number of farming locations in rural Tanzania. A special value of these studies is their historical dimension, wherein they are all based on a long-term approach adopted by the team, to revisit families and households whom they had researched in detail between ten and thirty years earlier, such that changes over fairly long periods of time in people's living conditions and assets and could be described and assessed in impressive detail. Most fortunately, notwithstanding the passage of time, the researchers managed to find the majority of their former research respondents. Many of the families in these studies have prospered, and subsequently educated their children up to university level, while others have dropped under the survival line.

Several eminent scholars have already commended this book for its strengths and contributions, also pointing out that it includes substantial empirical evidence from researchers who have revisited rural communities whom they had studied decades ago, providing a wealth of information about significant changes in many people's wealth status and assets over time.

Apart from the introductory and concluding chapters, the main bulk of the book presents a series of twelve chapters of case studies. The strength of this approach is that each of these studies can be read on its own, such that they each provide a wealth of information about their particular locations. While these studies do share some commonality in approach and time-span, they also vary considerably, such that it is difficult to offer generalised comments on the individual case study chapters in this brief book review.

That said, it is also worth noting the wide range of areas of Tanzania Mainland covered by the book, including thirteen of the country's regions, from the north of the country to the south and west (but not actually including the eastern coastal regions). This broad geographic coverage is accompanied by a historical coverage of up to three decades, which includes the impact of major changes of ideology and policies at national level from ujamaa-socialism and self-reliance, through the so-called market economy, and privatisation to full-blown neo-colonial capitalism. With this reportage across such major policy changes, the chapters present the survival and resilience of the rural folk, particularly women, in their persevering through crop cultivation and animal husbandry, and thereby being able to carry their families with them, which constitutes a major contribution of this study. Many of the findings of the book and its case studies are encouraging, witnessing progressive changes in the wealth and well-being of rural families.

Although this may be arguable, we feel that an aspect that the book touches upon in several parts, but does not address so systematically or rigorously, is that of the political economy of change in Tanzania as a whole, to situate this in the neo-imperialist context of a globalised, interconnected and increasingly unequal world, and then to link this locally to the fates of the families and households who have been studied. We feel that the book could have been strengthened by some deeper overall attention to this framing, especially in its introductory and concluding chapters.

The book does mention widening inequalities and the gap between rich and poor families, but a deeper analysis of the underlying political and economic mechanisms that lead to this would have enhanced the book's contribution to understanding the processes of these changes in rural Tanzania. The dimensions of class analysis seem almost absent. The neo-colonial nature of Tanzania's economy, the neoliberalisation of world trade in agricultural commodities, fundamentally affecting the lives of rural people, would have been interesting to learn about from the locations studied, in the summarising parts of the book.

Three brief personal reflections on the book that we wish to share are: Firstly, that by comparison to the cases presented in the book, for those of us who have interacted with and studied many coastal localities in Tanzania over the last six decades, we feel that coastal villager's and fisherfolk's fates have been generally less favourable than those of the cases described in this book. Multiple instances of land grabbing and evictions along the coast, with privatisation of village lands by tourism 'developments' and large conservationist interventions, amongst others, have resulted in marginalisation and impoverishment of coastal families and households. Secondly, we are continually saddened by the long and continuing history of colonial and post-Independence evictions and human rights violations against many pastoralist peoples across Tanzania, due to land grabbing for huge commercial farms, expanding wildlife and forest conservation areas and exclusive hunting zones – the fates of these peoples are not considered in detail in this book. Thirdly, we have also witnessed the lives of many people who have been forced by rural impoverishment to move to cities – for example, creating a group of people referred to as the *Machinga*, many of whom now live in slums or on the streets. Again, the fates of these peoples are not reflected upon in this book ... however, we recognise that a single book cannot cover everything, but we do wish to bring attention to these aspects of the much less fortunate lives of many millions of Tanzanian people, families and households.

Lastly, we would like to point out that we are not academically very well-qualified as anthropologists or ethnographers to comment on a major book of this calibre addressing rural changes occurring far from the Indian Ocean, written by distinguished and experienced scholars. However, we have always tried to grapple with reading inland rural development literature of Tanzania, in parallel with the coastal, marine and law literature, and so we hope that our reflections on this impressive book might be of some interest.

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