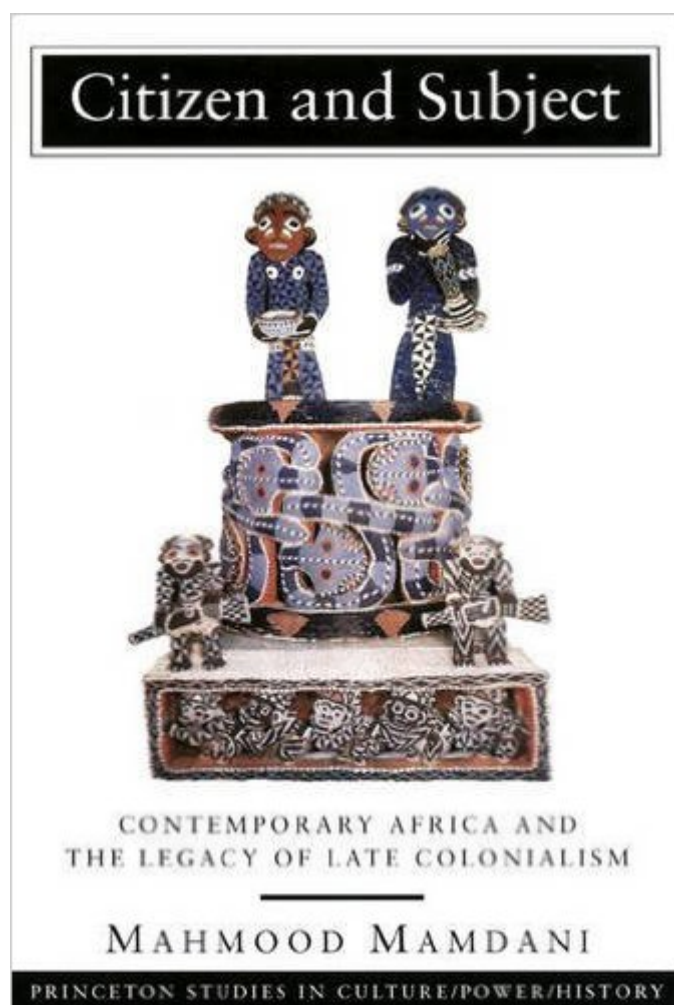


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Citizen And Subject: Contemporary Africa And The Legacy Of Late Colonialism (Princeton Series In Culture/Power/History)



Synopsis

In analyzing the obstacles to democratization in post-independence Africa, Mahmood Mamdani offers a bold, insightful account of colonialism's legacy--a bifurcated power that mediated racial domination through tribally organized local authorities, reproducing racial identity in citizens and ethnic identity in subjects. Many writers have understood colonial rule as either "direct" (French) or "indirect" (British), with a third variant--apartheid--as exceptional. This benign terminology, Mamdani shows, masks the fact that these were actually variants of a despotism. While direct rule denied rights to subjects on racial grounds, indirect rule incorporated them into a "customary" mode of rule, with state-appointed Native Authorities defining custom. By tapping authoritarian possibilities in culture, and by giving culture an authoritarian bent, indirect rule (decentralized despotism) set the pace for Africa; the French followed suit by changing from direct to indirect administration, while apartheid emerged relatively later. Apartheid, Mamdani shows, was actually the generic form of the colonial state in Africa. Through case studies of rural (Uganda) and urban (South Africa) resistance movements, we learn how these institutional features fragment resistance and how states tend to play off reform in one sector against repression in the other. Reforming a power that institutionally enforces tension between town and country, and between ethnicities, is the key challenge for anyone interested in democratic reform in Africa.

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Customer Reviews

CONTEXT: Mamdani's starting point is that colonialism caused a profoundly negative impact on African societies, and this impact is evident in the dysfunctional African states of the modern era, wherein governments struggle for legitimacy while civil unrest and low living standards are commonplace. OVERALL: Ultimately Mamdani does not succeed in proving his thesis, and for this 3 stars might be appropriate, but the educational value is so high and the sources so comprehensive that I give 4. The writing style is somewhat dense and occasionally opaque, the volume is a little more than it needs to be to impart the message. The worst of this is the introduction, which may be best to skip. The conclusion is a bit tinged with the short-lived post-Cold War idea that democracy is the answer for everything. CONTENT: Mamdani identifies the "bifurcated state" as a result of calculated colonial policy to most efficiently rule African colonies. In urban centers, individual liberties were defined and enforced, as in Western civil law. Customary law held sway in the hinterlands, however, and it was the key aspect of Indirect Rule, imported by the British from Asia. It dictated what claims the state had a right to make on individuals. Thus customary law was a means of controlling society, including land, women, animal herds, water, forest, etc. It was disguised as traditional practice because it was administered by the Native Authority - African "chiefs" acting as colonial agents. In reality it was malleable so as to ensure achieving colonial ends, which were essentially maintaining order, tax revenue, and labor supply. Historically, there were significant institutionalized cultural restraints on the power of chiefs.

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