African Peasant Economy from the Moral Economy Perspective

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This paper aims to review theories of peasant economy in Africa and Southeast Asia from the comparative perspective. Focusing on Goran Hyden’s notion of ‘the economy of affection,’ I will examine his argument on African peasantry in comparison with the ‘moral economy’ thesis developed by James Scott in the context of Southeast Asian peasantry. One can find theoretical similarities in the two theses, in the sense that both address themselves to communal and consumption-oriented values inherent in subsistence economy of peasants, in stark contrast to production-oriented utilitarianism which characterizes industrialized economy. At the same time, their arguments differ in details over how the moral-based economy actually works in peasant life, reflecting significantly different historical and cultural background of each region. These similarities and differences have important implications for endogenous development, which places a special emphasis on indigenous culture of each community, as an alternative to unsustainable models of economic development.