

# BOOK REVIEW

**Dorothea E. Schulz.** *Political Legitimacy in Postcolonial Mali*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2021. 236 pp. List of Illustrations. Abbreviations. Glossary. Bibliography. \$105.00. Cloth format. ISBN: 978-1-84701-268-5.

*Political Legitimacy in Postcolonial Mali* by Dorothea E. Schulz is a five-chapter study, with an Introduction, Conclusion, and Postscript. The study considers the concept of political legitimacy as it is understood by the Malian people in postcolonial Mali.

The thirty-page Introduction is a dense literature review, with elaborations in footnotes on the concept of legitimacy in academic literature. Schulz affirms throughout the study that only through a “conceptual clarification” of the term and an exploration of the “actual manifestations” of political legitimacy, as well as the attitudes of the population, can we understand the “political disarray and insecurity” of postcolonial Mali.

In Chapter One, “*Demokrasi* as the ‘rule of envy,’” Schulz presents an attitudinal assessment of the citizens (“mostly older farmers” in the Kita area of her research) regarding the central governments up to the mid-1990s. She gives good discussions of the sites of her conversations with these citizens, and in most of the chapters in the book she quotes from some of these people with whom she had conversations and who informed her understanding of the topic. It is clear from this and later chapters and from her own acknowledgment that these governmental regimes and her research area have been dominated by male Bamana/Maninka speakers.

The subject of Chapter Two, “Cultural Performance and Political Legitimacy: The Political Biography of *Jeli* Praise, 1960-91,” is the caste of traditional historian/praise singers in Mande regions and their role in generating (or not), legitimacy for political orders and leaders. Schulz looks at “broadcast praise” (radio, and later, some television presentations) during the governments of first president Modibo Keita and then coup leader and president Moussa Traoré (r. 1979–1991). She identifies the lack of representation or exclusion of the cultures of northern regions of the country in this governmental cultural outreach, which could have had a greater role throughout the work. Her study questions the relationship between compliance and

actual consent of the population, consent seeming to depend on actual contact with or benefit from political leadership.

In Chapter Three, “Decentralization and Political Legitimacy in Mali,” Schulz questions how effective administrative decentralization was in correcting the deficiency in political legitimacy among the populace. She suggests that the general political science analysis that there was broad acceptance by the citizens of this administrative decentralization is not borne out in closer studies of rural areas. Schulz identifies a number of confusions introduced for strengthening political legitimacy in this effort at decentralization, among them the limited accountability of the local leaders chosen by the state for local offices, competing sources of authority, lack of acceptance of enlightenment ideas of equality in a region with caste divisions, and the role of funding opportunities by international donors.

Chapter Four, “Staging ‘culture’ and Political Legitimacy in the Era of Liberalization,” looks at the extra wrinkle added to the difficulties in national political legitimacy once multiparty politics were introduced. Though efforts were made toward acknowledging the northern peoples post-1996, these efforts were not as successful as had been hoped. There were complaints about the “commodification of traditional culture,” as exemplified by the traditional caste of *jeli* performers using their skills to make money rather than valorizing the traditional uses of their performances (praise singing of historical figures). The use of broadcast media prioritizing Mande cultures, with less opportunity for northern peoples’ cultural presentations, is particularly evident and generated complaints outside Mandekan speaking areas, which further distanced the northern people from the central government and added to the government’s perceived lack of legitimacy among this northern population.

The period since the mid-2000s is the focus of Chapter Five, “Legitimacy in Question: The Challenge of Islamic Renewal.” Schulz’s empirical/field research was conducted over a twenty-year period in the region of Kita in southwestern Mali, along with linguistic/communication studies in the capital region. She presents her research as a historical study of the topic in postcolonial Mali. Here is where, from this historian’s point of view, the lack of attention to pre-independence history and to the northern region of the country in this study becomes most problematic for the title. The French determined the boundaries of Mali, but they did not deal equitably with the various peoples of Mali during the colonial period. The independent leadership of this created country continued to deal inequitably with the northern region of the country. This is one (not the only) of the main sources of the horrific problems with political legitimacy the country now faces. It would be helpful to have a greater concentration on the comparative concept of political legitimacy in the pre-independence and postcolonial eras of Mali.

The final sections, “Conclusion: In Pursuit of Legitimacy” and “Post-script: ‘Rest in peace, democracy?’” attempt to tie these difficult topics all together. The author provides excellent field research on the post-colonial era. The question remains, however, of how specifically did the people she

came to know in the Kita region consider the concept of political legitimacy in that crucial period of the late 1950s (the French colonial era) and the early independence era of the 1960s? The study does not address this issue specifically in any detail, providing real possibilities for further research, particularly as the number of people who lived during that colonial era continues to decline.

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