

BOOK REVIEW

Martha Wilfahrt. *Precolonial Legacies in Postcolonial Politics: Representation and Redistribution in Decentralized West Africa*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2022. 300 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$84.43. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1316518151.

Martha Wilfahrt's *Precolonial Legacies in Postcolonial Politics: Representation and Redistribution in Decentralized West Africa* is a new direction in research in African political economy. She establishes a link between the precolonial and the postcolonial vis-à-vis the sociopolitical relationship in African societies before the advent of colonialism and its effects on political redistribution in twenty-first-century local government administration in Senegal. Wilfahrt is an assistant professor in the Travers Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. This work is rooted in Wilfahrt's PhD dissertation at Cornell University.

The author's thesis is that villages that were under the same precolonial administration find it easier to distribute resources than those that had no kinship identity. According to her, since political elites control the government at the local level and are all familiar with one another, blood ties, marriage relationships and other sociocultural relationships make it necessary that they consider one another's needs and distribute resources without much political intrigue since they consider themselves as the same people. On the other hand, Wilfahrt argues that when villages under the same local authority do not share any form of kinship, economic distribution is done based on which community has more political influence at the local government level.

Wilfahrt's theory of institutional congruence seems to agree with Mahmood Mamdani's theory of the formation of cultural and political identities in post-colonial African states. According to Mamdani, the colonial experience had left modern African states with two types of citizens: the indigenous and the non-indigenous. He continues that it is at the local government level that this often plays out and one sees that civil rights go for all citizens but customary rights for the indigenous. This could explain why old families feel entitled to political leadership and other privileges which new settlers are not entitled to. Wilfahrt's theory also relates to Peter Ekeh's theory of two publics in postcolonial African states. Ekeh differentiates between the civic public and what he calls the primordial public and argues that whereas the civic public is amoral, the primordial public is moral. He goes ahead to explain that in the West, the public realm is one and stands on the same moral foundation with the private realm due to the Christian influence but the reverse is the case in modern African states where the civic public is robbed to settle the primordial public. It seems that

what Wilfahrt identifies as precolonial legacies where traditional kinship ties determine how resources are distributed at the local government level could be referred to as the effects of the primordial public—where the same actors in the civic public eager for personal aggrandisement serve their friends and relations selflessly.

Martha Wilfahrt's main argument is thus: decentralization in Senegal and of course in other African countries does not guarantee effective public goods delivery to the masses because political elites in each local government area collude with one another to rob the masses. She continues that decentralization has led to a reawakening of traditional authorities, and individuals who lay claim to such authorities have formed the elite class in each village and by gaining the support of their counterparts in other villages have cloaked themselves in a natural hegemony. However, in areas of high congruence, political leaders at the local government level are faced with two major challenges. The first is that they need to use their office well to please the electorates who most often are their friends and neighbors. According to the author, this gives them a good reputation, avoids social sanctions and ensures re-election. The second problem is that the politicians also take certain decisions to please groups or individuals with whom they share kinship ties or those that come from villages with which they have been in a longstanding relationship. This helps them to escape from being accused of being unfair.

The author's methodology is a combination of both qualitative data and quantitative tests. The book is in paperback and also on open access. Apart from a few spelling errors the book is sound and it will be relevant to students of political theory and the humanities in Africa and other parts of the world.

Wilfahrt's theory of institutional congruence might need to be retested in anglophone West Africa and other parts of Africa where indirect rule did not try to erase precolonial identities.

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