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Review: Mohamed Saliou Camara: political history of Guinea since World War Two

Ammann, Carole

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Camara, Mohamed Saliou (2014), *Political History of Guinea since World War Two*, New York: Peter Lang, ISBN 9781433122439, 531 pp.

Research that addresses socio-political issues in the context of Guinea has been largely neglected, especially outside of French-speaking academia. However, Anglophone scholars have taken increasing interest in the history and politics of Francophone African countries. As Mohamed Saliou Camara, who has published in both French and English, correctly notes (1), no detailed English overview of Guinea's recent past has been written. Therefore, this book, which successfully tackles the task of discussing Guinea's political history since World War Two, is most welcome. Camara started his academic career in Guinea, his country of origin, before gaining a Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University (United States). He is currently a professor of history and international relations at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (United States).

This volume is clearly structured into three parts. The first part covers the local, regional and global context of decolonization, emphasizing French West Africa, particularly Guinea. The second part scrutinizes the period of the First Republic (1958–1984) under Guinea's independence hero, Ahmed Sékou Touré. It discusses how the ideologies of this era influenced the country on political, administrative, economic, social and cultural levels. Here, Camara successfully sets out to correct the studies and accounts of personally involved authors on the Touré period, which are sometimes biased and politicized. The third part looks at the military rule of General Lansana Conté (1984–2008) and its immediate aftermath. It highlights the economic and (partial) political opening and illustrates the power struggles within the regime, the system of personal rule and the tumultuous period at the end of Conté's regime, which was marked by nationwide protests. A further chapter within the last part explores the transitional period after Conté's death that finally led to the election of Alpha Condé as the new president in 2010.

A laudable feature of the book is the inclusion of two sub-chapters on women's participation in Guinean politics. The author's emphasis on the international context and the foreign policy of each regime makes it possible to analyse Guinea's political history in a broader light. Thus, Guinea is shown in Camara's words as "an integral piece of the African puzzle and a product of the struggle for global hegemony" (464).

Camara's principal aim is to examine Guinea's past in its multi-layered social, economic and political context. To this end, he focuses on decolonization and nation-building, bringing together national, regional

and international events. One of the key characteristics and strengths of the book is that it recounts Guinea's history through the lens of ethnicity. The author clarifies that "ethnicity is a social construct which, over time, becomes a legitimate and viable framework of identity, whereas ethnocentrism is the offspring of corruption and immature politics" (466). Further, Camara raises the question of why the country's population is poor despite its rich natural resources. He identifies patronage systems and personified politics as Guinea's main problems and argues that "the principal endogenous catalyst for the failure of governance, crisis of state authority, and lack of national development has been the consistent absence of rule of law" (464).

Political History of Guinea is very well written. It provides an index, pictures of crucial moments in Guinea's history and a helpful list of abbreviations. However, readers are not made aware of the criteria Camara chose for integrating the references into his "selected" bibliography. The bibliography is incomplete, lacking some major recent contributions to Guinea's political history, such as those by the historians Odile Goerg and Elisabeth Schmidt and the anthropologists Mike McGovern and Jay Straker. Nevertheless, the data in Camara's book includes a variety of sources, including newspapers, online media, personal papers, autobiographies and reports. Importantly, it also references numerous interviews, including some with current and former politicians and members of the military and the administrative apparatus, but also with ordinary people such as market women.

The book is most compelling when the author reproduces authentic and detailed narrations and perceptions of people who were directly involved. For example, Camara sheds light on the (imagined and real) plots against Touré by successfully giving room to the different and often conflicting views, without taking sides. By extracting "solid information" from the sometimes "emotionally charged narratives" of his interlocutors (5), Camara follows the methodological approach of Jan Vansina (one of the important early figures within the area of African oral history). Unfortunately, Camara neither elaborates on current debates on oral history nor specifies how he tackles the challenges of this method. In addition, he fails to provide further theoretical background and his own understanding of largely debated and politicized concepts such as "development", "democracy", "reconciliation", "good governance" and "rule of law". Moreover, Camara uses essentialist notions such as "African values" and "African culture" rather uncritically.

In the conclusion, the author only partly summarizes his findings. Instead, he positions himself politically and gives his personal view on

why Guinea lacks "development". According to Camara, Guinea should strengthen "decentralization", enforce "rule of law" and bring "justice" to "victims" of "political violence" through a "truth and reconciliation commission". Finally, the author raises the question of whether a "democracy" inspired by Western ideals is the appropriate political system for African countries like Guinea. He calls for a "dyamacracy" – a middle way between a single-party system and a multi-party democracy – albeit without specifying what this "dyamacracy" should concretely look like (466).

All in all, Camara's clearly written volume is recommendable for scholars from various disciplines working on Guinea and will be equally accessible to a non-academic audience interested in the subject. It is a vivid account that provides a nuanced and well-balanced overview of Guinea's contested political history from 1945 to 2012.

▪ Carole Ammann