

Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food

By Michael G. Schatzberg

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"... refreshing and provocative... a significant addition to existing literature on African politics." ?Stephen Ellis

"It opens up a whole new field of investigation, and brings into focus the pertinence of an interdisciplinary approach to African politics." ?René Lemarchand

In this innovative work, Michael G. Schatzberg reads metaphors found in the popular press as indicators of the way Africans come to understand their political universe. Examining daily newspapers, popular literature, and political and church documents from across middle Africa, Schatzberg finds that widespread and deeply ingrained views of government and its relationship to its citizenry may be understood as a projection of the metaphor of an idealized extended family onto the formal political sphere.

Schatzberg's careful observations and sensitive interpretations uncover the moral and social factors that shape the African political universe while showing how some African understandings of politics and political power may hamper or promote the development of Western-style democracy. Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa looks closely at elements of African moral and political thought and offers a nuanced assessment of whether democracy might flourish were it to be established on middle African terms.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Excavating in the cultural context of authority relations, Schatzberg (Univ. of Wisconsin) adds fuel to the long-simmering debate over the peculiarities of African politics?and the assumed universality of explanations of Western social science?by demonstrating that legitimate rule in Middle Africa rests on a moral matrix of key premises: the father?chief; the importance, yet limits of consumption; the role and limits of inclusion and exclusion (largely women); and the organic alternation (generational rotation) of power. Space permitting, a fifth premise, on communal aspects of African life, could also be demonstrated. This review cannot do justice to the rich discussion and varied evidence from popular culture that Schatzberg adduces. This remarkable evocation of the politics of ordinary beliefs discusses what is politically thinkable, suggesting a cultural logic differing from the supports of states and institutions in the West. This is the realm of subjacent politics, an arena of implicit models that guide and condition political behavior. While the mundane implication is that the practices of bureaucracy and democracy in Africa will be interpreted in a special way, i.e., patrimonial and communal, the overall thesis fits within a Weberian and Tocquevillian tradition of the importance of culture and ideology in the exercise of power. This courageous book could form the basis of symposia for years to come." ?H. Glickman, Haverford College, Choice, June 2002

About the Author

Michael G. Schatzberg is Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is author of *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Indiana University Press) and *Mobutu or Chaos?* He is editor of *The Political Economy of Kenya*, *The Political Economy of Zimbabwe*, and co-editor (with I. William Zartman) of *The Political Economy of Cameroon*.

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