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## BOOK REVIEW

**Lineages of State Fragility: Rural Civil Society in Guinea-Bissau. Joshua B. Forrest. Athens: Ohio University Press. 2003. 312 pp.**

In this book, Forrest addresses the issue of the origins of Guinea-Bissau's state fragility and thoroughly analyzes the relationship between the country's rural civil society and state throughout the last century and a half. Basing his analysis on a comprehensive archival work as well as on more recent historical and anthropological studies, the author tests, through a historical and systematic approach, the applicability of J. Migdal's 'strong societies, weak states' theory in Guinea-Bissau. He very convincingly shows that both the strength and adaptability of Guinea-Bissau's rural civil society explain the inability of the country's fragile state to carry out its policies.

One of the obvious strengths of the book is that it follows a chronological pattern, which helps to underline the commonalities and continuity – comprised in the word 'lineages' - that characterized the relationship throughout three eras that are generally considered separately in African studies. In each chapter, the author methodologically studies the diverse strategies used by Guinea-Bissau's rural civil society to systematically escape central state rule. Goran Hyden's notion of an 'uncaptured peasantry' is another acknowledged reference: Forrest shows that, like its Tanzanian counterpart, Guinea-Bissau's peasantry was particularly skilled at escaping any form of state rule thanks to highly developed informal and cross-border trade networks. Guinea-Bissau's successive states were thus unable to submit the rural population to tax collection, forced-labor recruitment or even state-monitored circuits of capital.

Forrest here seriously challenges those who explain African state fragility by underlining the ethnic diversity of many African states. In Guinea-Bissau, ethnic determinism played no role in rural civil society's political decision-making. Rather, ethnic groups remained largely porous and non-exclusive, while inter-ethnic relations were dominated by pragmatic considerations that often led different ethnic communities to collaborate and conclude alliances in the face of Portuguese military and state violence. The most significant example of the ethnically malleable and incorporative character of Guinea-Bissau's social formations, according to the author, was the expansion of indigenous spirit forces (*irãs*), which originated in Mandjack areas but attracted tens of thousands of followers from various ethnic groups. They soon represented an alternative to the power of the colonial state, thus becoming an alternative political sphere. Forrest therefore aptly shows that more than the much emphasized African ethnic divisions, it is the extraordinary capacity of rural society to create alternative spheres of political and social authority and economic activity that explain state fragility.

Forrest's determination to study the Bissau-Guinean state's history over a long period of time gives an essential but often underestimated historical dimension to African political studies. One of the conclusions drawn from this comprehensive study is the strength of political memory and its significance for state-society relations in Guinea-Bissau. From the very beginning of the Portuguese colonial conquest, the communities to-be-conquered showed an extraordinary ability to unite and lead coherent guerrilla warfare against the undermanned Portuguese forces, often surprised by such resistance. Thanks to these first military victories, Guinea-Bissau's civil society developed a 'memory of praetorian success' that would re-emerge periodically through the colonial period, and then during the independence struggle.

Another conclusion drawn from this historical approach is the similarity in the colonial and postcolonial states' weaknesses and in their responses to civil society resistance strategies. Both the colonial and postcolonial state administrations were understaffed, generally incompetent and corrupt, both desperately resorted to the same means to try and submit civil society to the central state rule - authoritarianism and state-violence – and both experienced the limits of this strategy. Although the postcolonial state emerged out of a struggle partly supported by rural society's autonomous organizations, it was not more able to ensure the support and participation of rural society to its economic and social programmes than was its Portuguese predecessor.

The autonomy of Guinea-Bissau's rural civil society was thus never successfully challenged by the

country's successive regimes: "The combination of ethnoclastic political and social arrangements and incorporative, collaborative, interethnic social formations represent twin, reflective sources of social power in rural Guinea-Bissau, contemporarily as in the past" (p. 245).

Although Forrest wisely remains at the level of analysis without risking any policy-relevant conclusion, this raises the question of the nature of the state system, which will be able to efficiently carry out its state duties to a rural civil society mostly eager to retain its autonomy. Whatever the answer to this question, Forrest's comprehensive work underlines the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach – based on anthropological, historical and political science theories and methods - to address such issues.

Overall, this book is certainly one of the best-written and documented histories of the Bissau-Guinean state. It sheds a fascinating light on Guinea-Bissau's – and possibly Africa's - current society and politics for all social scientists. Many other lesser-known African countries could benefit from equal attention.

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