

## Reviews

**Historical Dictionary of Niger** (Fifth Edition) by RAHMANE IDRISSE.

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. 642. \$140 (hbk), \$133 (eBook).

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I am not sure that this fifth edition of the *Historical Dictionary of Niger* is proof, as the series editor Jon Woronoff suggests in his foreword, ‘that Niger is still “hanging in there”’ (xi) – whatever this may mean – but it is certainly proof that this book series is still ‘hanging in there’, despite the massive challenges that such series undoubtedly face today. With Abdourahmane Idrissa as its author, a political scientist and historian based at the African Studies Centre in Leiden and an outstanding expert in the recent political history of the Sahel region, this book has surely found one of the few scholars suited for the enormous task of compiling such a reference book.

The book opens with a 27-page chronology, of which 25 pages focus on events since the French occupation; it offers brief and tabular descriptions of key events in the past of what is now Niger, with a clear focus on political and economic issues. Then, the Introduction presents a two-page overview of Niger’s geography and the ethnic groups living there, as well as a 20-page political history since the French occupation, pre-colonial times being restricted to half a page. Although the beginning of the Introduction reads a bit like a tourist guide praising Niger as a ‘remarkable place, blending in its harsh Sahelian environment a great diversity of cultures and lifestyles’ (1) and ‘maintaining vibrant customs of hospitality and goodwill’ (1), readers should not be put off by this. The following pages present a truly accessible and excellent overview of major political events and periods in Niger since the late 19th century – an overview I had wished for as a student.

The core dictionary, 494 pages long, covers mostly persons, both living and dead, associations, organisations and institutions of Niger’s political history, again, beginning with the French occupation. The huge challenge for authors of such a reference book is, of course, to decide what to include and what to leave out. As a scholar of policing and security in Niger, while there are entries for the *Forces Armées Nigériennes* and the *Garde Nationale du Niger*, I was surprised to find none for the police, the *gendarmerie*, the *gardes de cercle* and *commandants ce cercle*, or the *Coordination*, Koutnché’s powerful secret police. A brief explanation of the selection criteria for entries would have been helpful, as would a list of key references for each entry to strengthen the book’s character as a stepping-stone for further in-depth literature research.

The bibliography of 72 pages serves as a ‘bibliographic guide of sorts rather than as a comprehensive or exhaustive bibliography of Niger’ (512) and comprises: general works; archaeology and prehistory; early accounts and monographs; people, society, religion (including ethnic groups); history; politics and economics; sciences; literature, cinema and the arts; tourism and travel; sources, reference works and bibliographies.

Despite Idrissa's remarks in the introduction to the bibliography, the book purports – qua title so to say – to be somewhat comprehensive and thus much more than a mere 'guide of sorts'. This implied promise is, of course, hard to fulfil. Yet considering the format of the *Historical Dictionary* series, which takes the discrete modern nation state as its unit of analysis, this unfulfilled promise is perhaps a welcome counterpoint to the potential reification of its very unit of analysis.

There is no doubt that the *Historical Dictionary of Niger* serves as an ideal entry point and stepping stone for further research into issues related to Niger. Although some areas are covered more intensely than others (there is more on party politics than on Nigérien music, poetry and film-making, for example), I strongly recommend it to students and scholars interested in Niger.

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### **Political Leadership in Africa: leaders and development south of the Sahara by**

GIOVANNI CARBONE & ALESSANDRO PELLEGGATA

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 386. \$99.99 (hbk).

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Postcolonial identities and developmental discourses have largely been shaped and re-shaped around the image, personalities and, often, myths of political leaders who ushered their new nation states to independence and beyond. Africa has been no stranger to this phenomenon over the last six decades or so since its decolonisation commenced, largely in conjunction with its democratisation. The weakness of political institutions and, as a result, economic and administrative institutions, has compromised the 'stickiness' of democracy and the extent of progress in national development and social welfare. The curious juxtaposition of leaders holding on to power for protracted periods in many countries, even as others witness an almost intractable susceptibility to regular coups d'état, is at the heart of the 'leadership trap' in postcolonial Africa.

Giovanni Carbone and Alessandro Pellegata's *Political Leadership in Africa* is a unique and much-needed attempt at reconciling the lack of attention that political science and development studies tend to place on political leadership as a theme, with the centrality that political leaders command in public discourse and popular perception. The theoretical gaps in understanding how leadership and processes of selection and removal influence and interact with the political economy of development are reflected in the paucity of data that may enable the empirical analysis of this relationship.

Through the course of this highly readable book, Carbone and Pellegata present an engaging account of the shifting dynamics of political leadership in Africa. Cutting across successions, dynasties, constitutions, multiparty transitions during the 1990s, military coups and their socio-economic impacts, and the tricky question of mandating term limits, the book empirically examines the link between leadership and economic growth, social welfare, state consolidation and anti-corruption measures. Carbone and Pellegata's empirical evidence confirms the higher frequency of coups in West and Central Africa compared with Southern Africa, while the latter witnesses the highest number of multiparty elections and fewer