

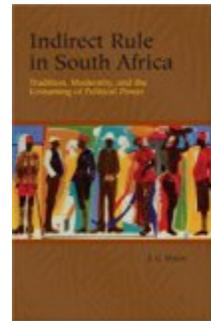


J. C. Myers. *Indirect Rule in South Africa: Tradition, Modernity, and the Costuming of Political Power*. Rochester Studies in African Histories and the Diaspora Series. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. xiv + 140 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-278-5.

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Absentee Rule and the Emergence of Dual Governing Systems in South Africa

Beginning with Sir Theophilus Shepstone in the 1840s, British colonial rule in South Africa became ever increasingly dependent on indirect rule as a policy. Shepstone was responsible for native affairs in the British Natal Colony where he recognized indigenous customs, such as chieftaincy, that were overlain with “a layer of British colonial administration” (p. 3). This led to the creation of dual legal systems: one for natives, the other for British colonials. British colonial authorities could then in theory govern natives less expensively, with less reliance on military force and administrative personnel, once the natives accepted laws believed to have been derived from their own traditional customs.

J. C. Myers, associate professor of political science at California State University at Stanislaus, skillfully explains the system of indirect rule in South Africa from British colonial presence in the early nineteenth century to the present African National Congress (ANC) government in his scholarly work titled *Indirect Rule in South Africa*. Drawing on political thinkers and philosophers, such as Niccolo Machiavelli, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, Myers presents an analytical view of indirect rule in South Africa that a general audience can understand even though it is clearly aimed at a more specialized reader. He is especially effective in his description of how indirect rule that developed under the British colonial system continued into the present ANC government of South Africa. According to Myers, the ANC is pursuing gender equity and rural economic development in part through

a recognition of chieftaincy that contradicts the modernization process. Myers points out that many believe it necessary “to recognize and entrust with political figures revered with African cultural tradition” the role of carrying out government policies even though it means reverting to indirect rule first developed by British colonial authorities (p. 101). Clearly, the ANC sought to legitimize its governance through recognition of chieftaincy believing in the obedience of his subjects to follow his commands no matter their source. Myers argues that this is “identical to the ideological strategy of indirect rule” (p. 102). Thus, the present-day ANC government has bypassed the processes necessary for democratic, representative government.

There are examples of resistance to indirect rule elsewhere within British colonial Africa. Like the ANC in South Africa, the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) in Ghana opposed native courts and chiefs’ presence within that court system during the 1950s. The CPP opposed chieftaincy as a symbol of indirect rule in its pursuit of independence from the British who imposed it on them. Nonetheless, as Richard Rathbone describes in “Native Courts, Local Courts, Chieftaincy and the CPP in Ghana in the 1950s,” the CPP followed British policies of indirect rule when beneficial to accomplish its goals.[1] In Nigeria, the British appointed warrant chiefs to carry out indirect rule. This resulted in the Igbo “Women’s War” of 1929, which was a protest against British indirect rule led by Igbo women who attacked native courts

and forced the resignation of several warrant chiefs during the protest. Not only was this an expression of anticolonialism, but it also represented the growing gender dynamic increasingly found within these nationalistic movements.

Casual observers of South African society and government today would readily recognize the prevalence of indigenous socioeconomic, political, and cultural practices. A superficial analysis would conclude that there is a certain tolerance or possibly enlightened recognition of traditional customs and beliefs dating back to the apartheid era and beyond. Upon closer scrutiny, as Myers observes, from British colonial rule to National Party apartheid and even to the ANC government today, these were the methods employed in establishing indirect rule. Such practices have provided various South African governments with the appearance of legitimacy.

South African governments have relied on the chiefs carefully selected or recognized, whether chosen by British colonial officials or democratically elected ANC politicians, to carry out their will indirectly. Occasionally, leaders like Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi have navigated between the two systems, cleverly using the government to reinforce their political power. Buthelezi ac-

cepted his position as traditional leader as determined by the National Party apartheid regime at the same time that he was denouncing it to enhance his position among the Zulu.

In all, Myers describes a system of divide and conquer through using customs, traditions, ethnic identity, and legitimization to impose government authority through indirect rule, whether it was British colonialism, apartheid, or democracy. He makes a significant contribution to the scholarship through his careful analysis and meticulous research into British indirect rule in South Africa. Additionally, he recognizes that indirect rule continued into the apartheid era and to today's ANC government. It is highly recommended that anyone interested in the political study of South Africa should read Myers's work.

Notes

[1]. Richard Rathbone, "Native Courts, Local Courts, Chieftaincy and the CPP in Ghana in the 1950s," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13 (2000): 126.

[2]. Jeremiah I. Dibua, *Modernization and the Crisis of Development in Africa* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

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