

## Editorial Foreword

**SYMBOLIC SOVEREIGNTY** Although sovereignty is often expressed by drawing boundaries and fixing jurisdictions, it is a remarkably fluid quality in practice, and most sovereign spaces are filled with gaps and transition zones in which no ultimate “decider,” or only a messy profusion of them, can be found. Sovereignty is often symbolic (in the diminished sense of being hollow, or just for show), but it can also be fullest and most viscerally real when it is experienced in relation to symbols: flags, uniforms, titles, decorations, monuments, anthems, and boundary markers. These symbols come with elaborately choreographed rituals of display, typically fusing military and sacred imagery, and attempts to disturb these rituals produce a keen awareness of sovereignty’s limits.

**James R. Brennan** explores the shifts in political sovereignty expressed by inhabitants of coastal Kenya who, circa 1953–1963, flew the red flag of the Sultan of Zanzibar. Protocol for raising and lowering this flag had been established in partnership with British colonial authorities, who recognized coastal Kenya as part of the Sultan’s dominion. Faced with the reality of an independent Kenya dominated by up-country Christians, subjects of the Sultan, mostly Swahili-speaking Muslims, lobbied for formal autonomy. Their movement, called *mwambao* (“coastline”), developed in the ambiguous terrain created by British treaties, and it emphasized political attachments to Indian Ocean society, Islamic law, and a diasporic, often absentee class of Arab landowners. The movement failed to win autonomy; the Sultan’s flag was replaced by that of Kenya, and coastal identities (but not, Brennan argues, the “subjective histories” that informed them) were submerged in new sovereignties made possible by decolonization and the post-war international legal system.

**Ken MacLean** considers the spell cast over Vietnamese politics by recent attempts to locate “Kilometer Zero,” the symbolic point at which China ends and Vietnam begins. According to rumors now circulating in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese diaspora, the Communist Parties of China and Vietnam secretly agreed to move the boundary between their countries in 1999, giving possession of Ai Nam Quan, an arch built in the fifteenth century, to China. The truth of this rumor is difficult to prove, and dozens of websites now feature maps and documents that purport to specify the terms of the secret deal and the exact whereabouts of the new border. Vietnamese authorities have been unable to quell the rumors, or control access to the web-based digital archives that provide source materials for critics of the boundary adjustment. Kilometer Zero, a prominent symbol of Vietnamese sovereignty, is now a symbol of

several kinds of space, virtual, domestic, and diasporic, the Vietnamese government cannot fully control. MacLean suggests that new models of Vietnamese national identity are emerging within and across these contested spaces.

**CONTINUITY PROBLEMS** Benedict Anderson once noted that a weakness of progressive thought is its aversion to the idea of historical continuity. This claim is supported by the tendency, now standard in post/colonial studies, to argue against the antiquity (and for the invention) of almost any identity or social formation that could be said to predate the colonial period. Most traditions, we now understand, are invented, but invention is an ongoing process. It can be continuous with, and experienced as, tradition. Given this fact, an ideological distaste for continuity, like a romantic yearning for it, is itself an analytical blockage. Certain tribal and ethnic identities, caste systems, legal traditions, or religious forms might be genuinely old; their continuity might be based on historical and cultural factors that post/colonial frameworks cannot fully explain. Such questions are best treated empirically, and the three essays featured here pose continuity as a problem to be explored, not a possibility to be ruled out.

**Judith Scheele** considers the staying power of Berber law codes in the Kabylia region of Algeria. Although these codes have long been dismissed as colonial inventions, they remain popular, and new, updated versions of the codes, now called “social pacts,” are being formulated and posted on village websites. French military officers first recorded and codified Berber customary law, but Scheele argues that they did not invent it, nor can French interest in law explain the enduring Kabyle tendency to formulate these codes or the similarities in content and form that distinguish the codes from Islamic law and from French attempts to systematize them. Looking at the most recent wave of Berber law-making, Scheele discusses the social problems and ethical assumptions that persist in the codes, most of which assert the integrity of the village as a moral and political space. The durability of intentional rule making as an aspect of collective life in Kabylia, Scheele argues, calls for innovative approaches to the study of law and different notions of what law itself might be.

**Paul Nugent** makes the case for greater time depth and continuity of development among West African ethnic groups, arguing that they are neither primordial entities nor colonial fabrications. Using the Mandinka and Jola of Senegal as one case, and the Ewe and Agotime of Ghana-Togo borderlands as another, Nugent traces these identities back to the early eighteenth century. Early European sources often make reference to groups that still exist today, and the information Europeans reported was clearly garnered from local sources. British and French colonial policies are part of local histories, which are conveyed not only in colonial archives, but in oral traditions as well. After following the careers of Mandinka, Jola, Ewe, and Agotime over centuries, Nugent concludes that all of these identities are situational and

products of historical contingency, but that in no case can one describe (or dismiss) them as colonial inventions. An intriguing complement to Nugent's analysis, focusing of East African contexts, is available in Neil Kodesh's recent *CSSH* essay, "History from the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History" (49, 3: 527–52).

**J. Lorand Matory** reassesses one of the classic cases of cultural survival and continuity in the African diasporas: the Gullah/Geechee people of coastal Georgia and South Carolina. Scholars have long portrayed this population as unique in the extent to which it has preserved African material culture, agricultural and culinary traditions, religious practices, and linguistic forms. Rather than dispute these claims to continuity, Matory criticizes the common assumption that Gullah/Geechee populations are distinctly African because they were historically isolated from dominant White culture. Showing how Gullah/Geechee communities have been tied to regional and international economies throughout their history, Matory links their distinctiveness to the fact that they owned their own land and controlled their own economy and self-representation more effectively than other Black populations. In this respect, Matory argues, the Gullah/Geechee people resemble other distinctive African diaspora populations in North America, such as Louisiana Creoles, and their cases call for models of cultural resilience and continuity that emphasize interaction, not marginalization.

**POOR AND HUNGRY POLITICS** Managing people with less food and fewer resources is one of the central tasks of ruling classes; it was perhaps their original and most basic responsibility, and it is hardly surprising that in almost all human systems of inequality, the poor and hungry are portrayed as a threat and a means to power. Sharing and charity were for centuries the favored responses to hunger and poverty; the idea that these problems can be "solved" through systematic social planning and public policy, thereby turning charity into social welfare, is an element of modern governance, and it is a predictable source of political controversy. The moral dimensions of hunger, which are often rooted in religious obligations to care for (and admonish or improve) the poor, are especially pronounced when the poor and hungry must be seen not as lesser beings, but as "citizens" and "fellow nationals," identities that bespeak an equality that, in the face of poverty, is revealed to be illusory. Two of our essays deal with the political challenges that accompany new ways of understanding, and enacting, collective responsibility for the poor.

**Larry Frohman** examines the break-up of the poor laws in Germany and Britain and the transition toward modern social welfare systems in the early twentieth century. This process reflected vast changes in the political economies of the industrial nations, but Frohman looks closely at shifts in the way charity, voluntarism, and social citizenship were understood by liberal and progressive policy advocates in Germany and Britain. He shows how progressive

theories oriented toward the prevention of poverty were remarkably similar in the two countries, and how movement away from deterrent poor laws, which attributed poverty to the moral failings of individuals, was accomplished by way of new models of social responsibility that cast poverty as a product of impersonal economic forces. Frohman argues that Progressivism, long considered an inconsequential strain in German political life, was central to these transitions, which led, after the systemic upheavals of the First World War, to the establishment of the German social welfare system.

**Sunil Amrith** follows a similar trajectory in India, where a putatively modern system of state-sponsored welfare replaced a precolonial system in which the poor were supported by charity, without elite classes feeling responsibility to care for all poor people as fellow nationals. Amrith discusses ideological changes that enabled educated elites to feel a more generalized solidarity with the poor and to reconceptualize charity as an obligation to the nation. Rapid commercialization and industrial development, however, encouraged the postcolonial state to pursue rationalized approaches to welfare provision, which would enable them to use “minimum standards” to prevent starvation, but would not eliminate malnutrition, poverty, and disease, which remain high in India to this day. At the same time, Gandhi addressed poverty by drawing heavily on religious principles, insisting that collective moral obligations could not be replaced by an impersonal welfare system and purely political relationship between citizens and the state. These tensions, Amrith contends, persist in contemporary Indian debates over social justice and the forms of human suffering the state is obligated to prevent.

**CSSH DISCUSSION** The Middle East and its diasporas in Europe and North America have recently seen an explosion of scholarship on publics and counter-publics. Much of this scholarship focuses on Islam and the secular, or on gender in public space and public culture, especially as it pertains to Muslim women, their headscarves, their activism, and other public displays of piety. In his review of new books dealing with public culture in Egypt, Turkey, France, and Lebanon, **Gregory Starrett** demonstrates the breadth and creativity of this genre. He notes that, as fashion, attention to publics has replaced an older interest in structure. Publics, he insightfully argues, can signify much more than structure ever did, ultimately bringing together zones of rational deliberation, cultivated affect, and embodied disposition. If structure now seems hopelessly mechanical and deterministic, Starrett helps us see how publics can figure as an even more coercive, even more enabling aspect of the social worlds these authors describe. “Durkheim,” he slyly observes, “smiles in his grave.”