Programme Point Sud 2014

Political Culture in Africa: The Narrative Foundations of Authority and Leadership

Bamako (Mali) – 6th to 10th October 2014

Report
Organisers
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Themes and Objectives

For many observers it seems all too obvious, that Africa is the continent where modern statehood has failed. The same observers and the same authors, expressing at times unfounded optimism when the democratic wind blew in the 1990s, are nowadays most pessimistic with regard to the African state. In our call to this workshop we quoted political scientist Robert Bates who wrote in 2008: “In the later decades of the twentieth century, Africa plunged into chaos. States failed, governments became predators, and citizens took up arms”. Bates argued that state actors are busy to loot by coercion the inhabitants of the countries they are ruling whereas these devote most of their time in resisting attempts at looting and exploiting them. This does not only cause frictions hampering economic development, but leads also to political disequilibrium between the state and groups of the civil society. And this is the reason why the African state has failed, Bates concluded.

We want to argue against Bates. In the first place, Bates’ argument does not withstand closer empirical examination. African state rulers are not busy looting their citizens, but are oriented towards the outside world, as well economically as in their political imagination. The French historian Coquery-Vidrovitch called this the "African mode of production" (1978). Coquery-Vidrovitch argued that earlier African societies evolved in ways that differed greatly from European and Asian societies. As observed by Coquery-Vidrovitch, early Africa does not provide examples of the exploitation of surplus labour by a ruling class. On the contrary, pre-colonial African economies seem to have been characterized by the juxtaposition of two contradictory circuits of production. On the one hand, there was village life, which revolved mainly around subsistence. On the other hand, both the evolution and reproduction of the élite in pre-colonial African polities were based on international and even intercontinental trade or raids against external territories (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1978).

In very similar terms, Jean-François Bayart has underlined the “perpetuation of a regime of external rents and internal under-exploitation” (Bayart 2000: 232) which characterizes earlier as well as contemporary African polities and states. Many empirical studies confirm Bayart's and Coquery-Vidrovitch's statements. There actually are wide gaps between the ruler and the ruled in Africa, economically, socially and politically. There is exploitation and predatory rule by the élites, but also and perhaps even more negligence and indifference about the conditions of life in which most citizens live.

Our second argument against Bates is that he seems to assume precisely that which should be explained. In line with the concept of political culture in main stream political science Bates seems to suppose that a stable political order requires political élites that are not predatory. This, however, ought to be the object of study: what does it actually take to commit political élites to non-predatory politics?

The proposed workshop took up these and similar issues following a research project which some of us conducted together under the heading "African political cultures" in five African countries. The main purpose of this workshop was to reflect with other scholars on the
relevance of the questions and findings from the joint research project to the broader
discussion on African politics. We were aiming at developing an analytical framework that
may guide future research in the field. We think that African political sociology is in need of
revision and the insights which we gained in our own research are one part towards achieving
this goal.

Methodology and Results

Our workshop "Political Culture in Africa: the Narrative Foundations of Authority and
Leadership" took place at the Centre for Local Knowledge "Point Sud" in Bamako, the Malian
capital. The workshop was held as programmed, apart from the fact that we began our
discussions on Monday, the 6th of October instead of Sunday, the 5th of October; Sunday the
5th being a religious feast ("tabaski" or aid al-adha).

Bamako in general and Point Sud in particular has proven to be good choices for our
workshop, and this for two reasons: As we had expected, colleagues and students from
Bamako research institutions and the University of Mali joined us and participated vividly in
the discussions. Some of the Malian scholars work on political culture as we do, albeit from
different perspectives, and we benefitted enormously from their input, as they benefitted from
the conceptual reflections and the comparative approaches during the workshop which may
well enrich their own perspectives. The second reason was that Point Sud and its staff has
once again proven to be most amiable and well organized hosts. We will take this opportunity
to express our gratitude towards them and to thank them all.

As planned, discussions during the workshop evolved around three main axes. The first axis
was a theoretical one; it consisted of a perspective focusing African political sociology in
general and discussing both its insights and shortcomings. The second axis was conceptual
bringing attention to bear on key concepts and the extent to which they are able to account for
the complexity of African political phenomena. In this context, we explored the potentials of
the "African Political Culture" concept in our own socio-anthropological reading which
differs in many aspects from the political culture concept commonly in use in political
science. The third and final axis was methodological that engaged with tools of inquiry, data
collection and analysis that seem to be robust enough to pursue the research program
suggested by a focus on political culture in our reading. Here, we mainly drew on our own
research on political culture and on the research tools we developed during research. We
discussed our experiences, the potentialities as well as the shortcomings of the methodological
tools we had employed. We did so in particular with the doctoral students who had joined us
and who then went out for qualitative surveys in Bamako, which they presented the last day of
the conference.

As mentioned above, the workshop took place from Monday, 6th of October, to Friday, 10th
of October 2014. The first three days were structured around the discussion of one axis a day;
i.e. we discussed the theoretical, the conceptual, and the methodological axes during the first
three days. Each perspective was introduced by a keynote speaker who laid down the relevant
issues, followed by individual presentations that took up different aspects of that axis. As well
at the end of the third day as at the end of the conference, we had discussions in the plenary.
After the first three days, we attempted at summarizing the most promising theoretical,
conceptual and methodological perspectives. On the last day of the conference, we discussed
first the respective presentations of the doctoral students; then we spoke about possible
outcomes, like f. ex. the publication of the conference's results and the question what lessons
we could learn for future research projects.
As planned, we had two practical sessions with the participation of PhD candidates from various universities: Bamako, Basel, Bayreuth and Bielefeld, all of whom attended the whole workshop. All PhD candidates were selected ahead of the workshop on the basis of their research project and a written proposal that addressed the issues of the workshop. After the sessions of the third day, Georg Klute and Elisio Macamo introduced the students into the methodological tools we had employed for our research on political cultures we had mentioned above. We then grouped the students into two groups each of which prepared a micro-research project or qualitative survey. We discussed the pros and cons of each proposal, suggesting possible modifications.

On the fourth day, both groups went to the city of Bamako for research. The first group did research around Mali's independence monument situated in the city's centre. The group conducted interviews, took part in talks which people had both among themselves and with the researchers and passed time with the monument's keeper and visitors. The second group went to places in town where many people gather (bus-stops, market-places). The objective was to find out about basic narrative(s) in Mali and the ways how they are discussed. The group wanted also to answer the question whether there are contradicting basic narratives in Mali or not. The grouped used similar qualitative methods of data collection as employed by the first group.

Each group then discussed and interpreted the data gathered and presented their findings the following day to the other participants of the workshop.

**Sustainability of the Event**

In the final discussion, all participants agreed to present the results of our research as well as the outcome of our discussions in Bamako to the academic public. We therefore plan to prepare an edited volume with the working title "Political Culture in Africa the Narrative Foundations of Authority and Leadership". We already contacted Lit editing house in Berlin which declared interest.
Participants

1. Prof. Georg Klute  Anthropology, Bayreuth University
2. Prof. Elisio Macamo  Sociology, University of Basel
3. Dr. Abdoulaye Sounaye  Islam Studies, University of Niamey and ZMO Berlin
4. Dr. Dida Badi  Anthropology, Centre National de Recherches Préhistoriques, Anthropologiques et Historiques, Algier
5. Dr. Bettina Engels  Political Science, Bayreuth University
6. Dr. Esther Uzar  Sociology, University of Basel
7. Prof. Isaie Dougnon  Anthropology, University of Bamako
8. Prof. Jeremy Gould  Anthropology, University of Helsinki
9. Dr. Neo Simuntayi  Political Economy, University of Lusaka
10. Prof. Peter Skalnik  Anthropology, University of Prague
11. Dr. Raul Fernandes  Anthropology, INEP, Bissau
12. Dr. Thomas Hüsken  Anthropology, Luzern University
14. Susanne Schultz M.A.  Anthropology, Bielefeld University
15. Lamine Doumbia M.A.  Anthropology, University of Bamako, BIGSAS Bayreuth
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18. Bouréima Touré M.A.  Anthropology, University of Bamako
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20. Youssouf Touré M.A.  Law, University of Bamako