



Programme Point Sud 2014

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

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

Report

stias STELLENBOSCH INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
STELLENBOSSE INSTITUUT VIR GEVORDERDE NAVORSING



DFG

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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 elites, 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 elites that are not predatory. This, however, ought to be the object of study: what does it actually take to commit political elites 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

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2. Prof. Elisio Macamo Sociology, University of Basel
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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 Hüskén Anthropology, Luzern University
13. Jon Schubert M.A. African Studies, Edinburgh University
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18. Boureima Touré M.A. Anthropology, University of Bamako
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