

African Chiefs as Brokers of Democratic Political Culture

Afričtí náčelníci jako prostředníci demokratické politické kultury

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ABSTRAKT:

Tento článek se pokouší definovat kritéria, podlenichž afričtí náčelníci mohou usnadňovat a monitorovat demokratické vládnutí v moderních postkoloniálních státech. Autor tvrdí, že pouze náčelníci, kteří jsou schopni dodržovat morální imperativy, jež se odvozují z minulosti, mohou své poddané povýšit do stavu občanů moderních států bez ztráty kontinuity jejich identity.

Článek rozebírá a určuje, jací afričtí náčelníci byli skutečnými usnadňovateli demokratické politické kultury, a tudíž fungují jako aktéři moderního politického života bez toho, že by zabředali do politických tahanic a politické korupce, jež způsobují, že mnohé africké moderní postkoloniální státy jsou nestabilní a autoritářské. Autorita náčelníků je založena na morálních a nadpřirozených rádech a opírá se o podporu a důvěru lidu. Lidový a konsenzuální charakter náčelnictví je zárukou demokratického vládnutí v náčelnictvích i jinde. Náčelníci jsou nebo mohou být kontrolory demokracie bez toho, že by byli voleni. Tento paradox dědičných titulů a schopnosti působit demokraticky je specifickým rysem moderní africké politiky.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

afričtí náčelníci, postkoloniální státy, demokratická politická kultura, africká politika

KEYWORDS:

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In this paper I would like to make an important point: to argue for democratic potential of chieftaincy in today's Africa. This may sound as an unlikely statement because for decades we have been fed by propaganda about inherent reactionary character of chiefs because they were "feudalist", unelected and their governance was not accountable. According to these views chiefs and the institution of chieftaincy as well as the politics – chiefdoms – are the relics of the pre-colonial past. At the same time the explanation of their continuing existence in many if not most African countries was inadequate. Some authors would argue that chiefs are today unable to understand modern politics, that they have no other interest than their own aggrandizement and common people are at the mercy of their ill will. But the same writers as if they did not see that elected modern politicians are exactly doing that what chiefs were blamed for. The politicians, not chiefs, ruined the economy. The politicians used their elected posts to enrich themselves while chiefs were often left without any remuneration even though they made part of the state administration and as such were under state's control. Whether viewed as good or bad, the chiefs could not be blamed for the failures of

ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to define the criteria under which African chiefs can be facilitators and watchdogs of democratic governance in modern post-colonial states. It argues that only chiefs who manage to observe the moral imperatives that derive from the past can promote their subjects into citizens of the modern states without losing the continuity of their identity.

It discusses and determines what kind of African chiefs have been true brokers of democratic political culture and thus function as actors of modern political life without necessarily getting bogged down in party political bickering and political corruption which makes many African modern post-colonial states so unstable and authoritarian. Chiefs' authority is based on moral and supernatural precepts and relies on the support and trust of the people. The grassroots and consensus character of chieftaincy is the guarantee of democratic governance both within chiefdoms and beyond. Chiefs are or can be watchdogs of democracy without being elected. This paradox of hereditary recruitment and ability to act democratically is a specific feature of modern African politics.

the modern state. In some countries, such as South Africa, this control by the modern state led inevitably to collaboration with the apartheid regime. Chiefs, however, realized their dependence and once apartheid was removed they readily declared themselves as actors of the democratic process. This may be seen as opportunism but also as a genuine effort to be the spokespeople for the underdogs, especially those living in the rural areas. In other parts of Africa, chiefs were restored after some time of suppression.

All over Africa, including the North, chieftaincy has been gaining or regaining importance, perhaps in direct relation to the weakening of the state. The weaker the state, the stronger chiefdoms. This equation sounds bit exaggerated but actually the vacuum created by non-functioning of the state opens space for traditional political action represented by the chiefs. The question of democracy in Africa takes shape different from Europe because the chiefs are spokesmen of the people, thus acting as a controlling factor balancing against the abuse of power by the state, now so widespread. In ideal situations chiefs are true representatives of their subjects, unelected,

hereditary but more faithfully expressing the wishes of the people than modern style politicians. Kate Baldwin (2016) in her excellent analysis concludes that chiefs in rural areas are promoters of development. I would add that chiefs everywhere, whether neo-traditional or invented by the colonialists, have the seemingly paradoxical ability to contribute to democratic politics. The modern politicians, though elected, have not been so closely attached to the constituency which elected them, often lured by promises never intended to be fulfilled. The chief, unelected, is closely bound to the subjects, he is morally obliged to care for the welfare of "his" people. The position of the chief is often underpinned ritually or spiritually because the origin of chiefship is believed to have emerged through supernatural sanction. If chiefs are of immigrant origin, they may have acquired their religious qualities through pacts with local gods or beliefs. The modern politician has no guarantee that he or she will be elected again, no supernatural sanction blesses her or his activities except routine references to God. Modern African politicians need the chiefs not because they like to be re-elected but because with support of the chiefs they can more likely execute their programmes.

The institution of chiefdom (also known as chieftaincy, in French *chefferie*) is a genuine African invention. Because it is based on political culture principles other than those of the state, it could continue to exist in many African countries in parallel with the imported modern colonial and post-colonial state. During the 20th century, which saw introduction of the controversial colonial policy of indirect rule, the position of chief has continued to adjust to the demands of time. In the same period of time the modern African state visibly lost its prestige. The quality of governance in Africa will have to improve drastically if Africa's populations should view their rulers as legitimate and democratic. The paper shows on the one hand how original African governance worked in African chiefdoms. On the other hand, a scenario of an integration of chiefdom and state principles will be proposed for Africa. In a number of countries around the world, chiefs and chieftaincy were not abolished and they have existed until this very day. In Oceania in several states such as Samoa, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia and Kingdom of Tonga, chiefs are either directly responsible for the government or they function as close advisors to the elected representatives. In New Zealand Maori chiefs might soon become legislators. In Africa chiefs are active in politics in the post-apartheid South Africa. However, on the whole

the role of chiefs still suffers from previous marginalization due to policies of emulation of foreign patterns of governance while ignoring the decisive role of original African institutions.

Chiefdoms were first described by anthropologists and archaeologists in the Americas. They usually viewed chiefdom as a small-scale society, organised according to kinship and other face-to-face ties, led by a hereditary or elected chief. If chiefdom consists of a hierarchy of chiefs then a paramount chief is in the helm of a complex chiefdom or kingdom. Chiefdoms usually comprise few thousand people who tend to know each other (face-to-face relations). Their political life is based on consensus rather than coercion. Ritual ideology is the unifying force. Economic basis of chiefdom societies was as a rule agrarian. They are ranked into social strata, the prestige of the chiefs and priests being the highest. In Africa chiefdoms under this term were described by anthropologists as living socio-political formations for example in Sierra Leone, southwestern Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria. Elsewhere in Africa Ugandan and Tswana chiefdoms are well-known examples of this political form. In Ghana, which I know from long field sojourns, 'chieftaincy' is the commonly used term and all over Africa by 'kingdom' is often meant chiefdom (cf. Skalník 2004, 2008).

Anthropologists and archaeologists traditionally thought in terms of an evolutionary sequence from chiefdom to state (Grinin et al. 2017; Skalník 2018). That is why chiefdom was perceived as belonging to the past and represented a less sophisticated level of development of human society. However, as I indicated earlier, chiefs and chiefdoms coexist within modern states in some parts of the world. Currently debates are going on whether and how they can be incorporated, or at least the principles by which they are governed, into the modern political discourse and decision-making in those countries. For example if the modern state has been brought from outside as it happened in Africa, and the modern state is of European origin, chiefdom would rather mean a locally evolved political form which was stopped in its development by historical circumstances and incorporated into the imported state polity as its lowest political unit. Therefore, the relationship between chiefdoms and states in contemporary Africa is a complex one. We are dealing with two parallel logics which are either opposed in super/sub-ordination perspective or they can prove to be mutually compatible and complementary. As the imported modern African state became corrupt, notoriously unstable and inefficient during the post-colonial period, dissatisfied populations realized that especially on the local and regional level, less centralized forms



African chiefs at a Zulu wedding, Natal, South Africa. G. G. Henderson, 1905. © Wellcome Collection gallery.



The current traditional king of Ghana's Asante people, the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II celebrates 20 years on the Royal Stool.
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of government are desirable. It is not a surprise that Africans now realise that their ancient though often neglected and ill-transformed institutions such as chieftaincy might be useful tools for achieving reform of politics in their respective countries.

At this place I would like to underline that the shift towards democracy as a dominant organizing principle of politics that has been taking place in Africa since the beginning of the 1990s, has given chance not only to the development of party political pluralism but also woke up from lethargy the chieftaincy, often suppressed or relegated to passive obscurity by both colonial and postcolonial regimes. Indirect rule has been an ambivalent feature of African politics during the 20th century. Invented perhaps more as a virtue out of necessity than as an ideal solution to the problem of ruling efficiently vast colonial empires in Africa, India and elsewhere in non-European world, indirect rule remains to a certain degree part of the contemporary reality in Africa, Pacific and other continents. Africans, although they have internalised western practices in their daily life, also continue respecting their traditions, chiefs and chiefdoms in particular. The kind of political culture that dominated life in chiefdoms is coming back with the call for renaissance in Africa. The most cherished and indeed original are the values summarised under the headings such as chiefship, chieftaincy, chiefdom. The question is today more than ever before:

how to combine the traditional or neo-traditional African political culture with that developed during the existence of independent modern states? Would the present modern elites, so compromised by their questionable policies and even misrule, be able to share the political playground with the chiefs and the values they represent? Many politicians and chiefs (sometimes the same persons) speak about solutions in that vein. But the reality is a bit different. For example, in Cameroon, the decree of 1977 openly designates chiefs as "auxiliaries" of the state administration. The post-colonial state has consistently sought to undermine the prestige of chieftaincy and turn chiefs into clients: "post-colonial state's contempt for chiefs is glaringly obvious" (Ben Jua 1995: 43). Indeed, there are very few examples of voluntary surrenders of at least part of the legitimacy of the modern politicians in favour of the original African political culture. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999) argued that Africa works despite disorders or through disorders of modernity. I would rather like to see the good working of Africa in reconciliation with the forces coming from her pre-colonial past (Skalník 2001).

The Ghana case helps to understand the problem. The British policy in the Gold Coast started with an attempt at direct rule. The British military first crushed the powerful Asante confederacy, a cluster of chiefdoms in the centre south of the present state of Ghana. The paramount chief

or king, the Asantehene, was taken prisoner and sent to exile in the Seychelles. However, the very embodiment of Asante political culture, the Golden Stool, was never seized by the British and they eventually realised that they better restore respect for the Asantehene and the succession rules to the highest office in Asante. So the indirect rule policy was brought to the then Gold Coast. Meanwhile western-style educated elite has worked on the quest for independence. Kwame Nkrumah, their leader and later Prime Minister, himself hailing from a marginal ethnic group loosely dependent on Asante, has feared the chiefs and especially those from Asante. He attempted to curb their influence. He distinguished between loyal and disloyal chiefs but never went as far as abolition of this age-old institution. Nkrumah's policy was not successful but the chiefs did not get adequate recognition as actors in the political system of the independent country. Subsequent legislation on chieftaincy that was meant to make chiefs more visible and respected only tabled the problem but did not resolve it. The civilian regime of Dr Kofi Busia, himself sociologist and anthropologist who studied the modern role of Asante chiefs, approved the Chieftaincy Act of 1971 which provided for the National House of Chiefs and Regional Houses of Chiefs. These new institutions were not incorporated into the political decision-making in the country. Traditional institutions were to be kept separated from modern politics. Thus nobody powerful really listened to the chiefs even though some chiefs dared to contact the rulers of the day. The modern western-educated rulers of Ghana did not want to remove chiefs altogether but did not want to allow them any *real* access to power. As a matter of fact, some of the heads of state Nkrumah included, styled themselves as chiefs, even if they seized power illegally in a coup (cf. Rathbone 2000).

I spent at least two years in the field studying local politics in the ethnic group of the Nanumba and in particular their chiefdom of Nanun. It was conquered by the Germans in 1896 and even if they, as their British and Ghanaian successors, tried hard to tinker with the rules of succession to the high office of the Bimbilla Naa, i.e. the paramount chief of the Nanumba, they eventually reconciled themselves to the continued existence of chiefs and their characteristic political culture. The central political institution there was *naam* which not only appeared to be very old but alternated between two chiefly houses and was embedded into a complex network of relations which ensured that the chiefs, if not supported by their subjects, would become rather obsolete.

I discovered various ritual checks whereby non-chiefly autochthonous people exercise a kind of original African democratic leverage which do not allow abuse of the chiefly authority. As I have written about these checks and balances in detail elsewhere (Skalník 1996b), it is not necessary to repeat at length the argument. Let me just mention that the balance has been assured by the role the ritual specialists from sacred autochthonous villages play at crucial moments of passage of the *naam* from one chiefly segment to another. During the paramount chief's ritual funeral decisive operations are done by these specialists who are believed to be totally indispensable. They are aware of this role and keep the *naam* in suspense for few days. Another group of mainly autochthonous chiefs serve as electors during the selection of the new paramount which follows the funeral and similarly are the indispensable in the most decisive moment. It should be noted that neither group of autochthons has any chance of "eating" (taking) the *naam* themselves. The division of labour during each renewal of Nanumba politics is evident. We can learn from it when reflecting about the solution of the blind alley of African modern politics.

Whereas the original policy of indirect rule was invented in order to harness, pacify or neutralize the imagined competition from chieftaincy, the new indirect rule which I am advocating here is based on the full realization of the fact that the modern state needs chieftaincy as its equal partner. Whereas the Lugard's "dual mandate" was meant as a blueprint for a gradual overcoming of "backwardness"

and inclusion of Africans into the modernity according to European lines, it was not to last long. It was only a slogan wit in the rhetoric of the British colonial policies of the 20th century which was never to be really dual. The decades since Lugard have brought independence about which he also wrote but brought also the realisation that original African institutions are to stay. Politics in most African modern states is very deficient as many analyses show so clearly. As elsewhere in Africa state's power is too dangerous and wars are always a threat.

Otto Raum, writing in the 1930s, saw the specificity of indirect rule in "the determination to develop the indigenous political institutions" (1936: 101) and to adapt them to the social change caused by culture contact. Recently Ernest Gellner when discussing Malinowski's appreciation of indirect rule developed a new set of ideas regarding cultural variety within a stricter international rule. "The real essence of indirect rule is that it limits the political power of local rulers" while it encourages and sustains "the cultural expression of the indigenous society, including its political hierarchy... Political independence is limited, cultural exuberance and idiosyncrasy are enhanced and assured. More elephants and camels, less terror. That is the real heart of Indirect Rule". Inspired by flourishment of the Polish culture in the Habsburg-governed Galicia, Gellner suggest along with Malinowski the creation of a "League of Nations with teeth" which would ensure surrender of sovereignty by nation-states, "enough to render further wars or oppression difficult or even impossible"

(Gellner 1998: 142–143). Freedom and fulfilment would be thus safeguarded. I think that this should inspire us in our thinking about the political arrangement in Africa (and elsewhere in the world!) today.

Chieftaincy is equipped by its ritual, often sacred underpinnings. It is an institution of wisdom and tradition, indeed authority, not of executive government and administration. The strained relationship between the state and chieftaincy ("the state cannot live with the chiefs but also not without them") will have to be resolved by recognition of their different roles in the society. Therefore, the solution of the seeming dilemma lies in the division of labour. All levels of executive government will have to be wetted by the chiefs as historically established representatives of people.

The old indirect rule which kept chiefs subservient to the state by pretending that they are the lowest elements of it (and thereby denigrating them into collaborators and stooges) will have to be substituted by a truly dual mandate in which chiefs and chieftaincy receive the role of a safeguard and a guarantor of democracy. The role of the chiefs and their representative colleges will be not advisory but decisive. The decisions of the chiefs and their councils on each level will be binding for the whole collectivity under its jurisdiction. Chieftaincy will be at the same time an independent actor standing above the executive power, a special part of the legislative and legal establishment. The chieftain politics is to play its crucial role in democratisation process in Africa (Fisiy 1995; Skalník 1996a).

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