African Political Cultures and the Problems of Government

ELLIOTT P. SKINNER

INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this essay is that African countries will continue to be racked by conflicts unless leaders agree about how to govern their multi-faceted nation-states and how to distribute their economic resources equitably. Without a compromise that would ensure "ethnic justice", neither so-called "liberal democracy", nor any other species of government will succeed in Africa. If "liberal democracy" presently has any evolutionary advantages, it will have to adapt to local realities, and its contours will be shaped by indigenous African socio-cultural traditions. These have been changing over time, and now face the challenge of a Post-Cold War world where people are demanding equity. Can anthropologists contribute to the debate about these issues?

Recently, while explaining to a group of influential Americans the constitutional problems in his country, an African diplomat remarked with a smile, "Oh, I was told that I must not use the concept 'tribalism' in America, but should use 'ethnicity' instead." What he implied was that whether one called his fellow citizens "tribalists" or "ethnics", they used the same sentiment in competing for power and all that flowed from that. Thus, a concept that had formerly been used to trivialize the complexity of African societies undergoing colonization was proving to be impervious to change by later anthropologists and by Africans themselves [1].

Discourse about "tribalism" or "supertribalism" or "ethnicity" in contemporary Africa is now linked to demands for "democracy" (another kind of "discourse") that I would prefer to see as demands for political or regime change. Africans are seeking relief from coups, misgovernment, and economic collapse. Many western governments, especially the US, also threaten to withhold economic aid from African countries that do not move toward democracy.

The problem is that when questioned seriously, Americans often admit that for them "democracy" is really an act of faith. For example, US Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering declared at the United Nations, on October 28, 1991 ("African Day Devoted to Debt Relief"):

Reforms to improve governance are essential, both for sustainable economic growth, and political stability .... The bottom line of good governance is democracy itself. It is not our role to decide who governs any country, but we will use our influence to encourage governments to let their people make that decision for themselves.... In sum, we will help those who move towards democracy.

Many Africans, especially those tired of military dictatorships and faltering economies, and politicians out of power and in exile, applaud these prescriptions. Nevertheless, they wisely or cynically refrain from defining the criteria for their own political culture. The result is that both

Elliot P. Skinner is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University, where he held the Franz Boas Chair of Anthropology. He served as US Ambassador to Upper Volta.

the US and many African leaders are creating the basis for "disemia". This is a condition among local power seekers who, to please hegemonies, may either disguise those aspects of social life that conflict with the hopes of tutelary powers, or create systems out of phase with local realities, or cynically manipulate local conditions to gain or remain in power.

Unfortunately, due primarily to the history and function of our discipline, anthropology never gained respect among indigenous Africans [2]. Even African anthropologists distance themselves from us, (ironically naming us among the proverbial "Others". We anthropologists still retain that rural bias once judged necessary to capture the essence of African socio-cultural systems. We continue to ignore the realities of rapidly urbanizing African societies. Even our post-modernist discourse deals with the esoteric of fast disappearing African traditions, rather than with how modernizing people gain power and control resources. Many anthropologists still refuse to learn African languages, even when they attempt to deconstruct the subtleties of their discourses in order to get at the variegated images in African minds.

In striking contrast to anthropologists, African politicians in the late 1950s and early 1960s were primarily interested in the issues of "independence", "national integration", and "modernization", somewhat in that order. This tiny, largely urban and westernized minority, aspired to lead their largely rural, and basically agricultural societies, still governed by traditional authorities who were often deemed decadent and reactionary. Kwame Nkrumah, and his cohorts, sought the "political kingdom" and felt that everything else would be added thereunto.

With their knowledge of the economic, political, and social realities of the colonial world, most anthropologists, feared a difficult decolonization process. Geertz, among others, warned that the persistence of "primordial bonds" (based on kinship, blood, language, and religion) could frustrate the emergence of a new "political society" [3]. He hypothesized that the creation of "new states" bent on "modernization" and "national integration" might initially increase conflicts in African societies. Geertz recommended a "macrosociological" methodology to gain a "holistic or comprehensive" view of the problems facing those societies [4].

The young American political scientists who saw in decolonization a fruitful area of study fully expected conflict to accompany socio-cultural change. After all, they often defined politics as "who gets what" and this frequently involved severe conflict. The dominant paradigm many brought to Africa was that there was a positive relationship between economic development and greater social and political integration. These scholars, therefore, had little difficulty with intergroup tensions due to "political competitiveness." As they saw it, "political competitiveness" was an "essential attribute of a democracy" [5].

Invited by Kwame Nkrumah to teach "sociology" at the emerging University of Ghana, St. Clair Drake, an "anthropologist", noted the actual conflict between the traditional authorities and the modernizing politicians. But fearing to be considered a conservative and reactionary anthropologist, Drake was prudent. He stressed that anthropologists could make a contribution to the understanding of social change by studying what factors facilitated or hindered the traditional leaders from playing an important role in "the process of planned economic and social development" [6]. Few founder-presidents of African states welcomed Drake's advice.

With Botswana and Swaziland among the major exceptions, the emerging African leaders opted for the political cultures of their metropoles: the Westminster model, and the Belgian and

French presidential and premier systems. These men ignored that the governmental processes they cherished had evolved in economically, industrially, politically, and socially complex state systems. Moreover the Europeans judged these "too civilized," for transfer to the colonies. African leaders ignored what Pearl Robinson would later term the "cultures of politics" that had developed during the colonial period, and used, as Gramsci stated, to maintain "hegemony protected by the armor of coercion" [7]. The African nationalists even ignored their own counter-racist philosophies such as "negritude" and the "African Personality." They occasionally paid lip service to traditional political cultures, but firmly rejected compromise with African traditional politicians for fear of derailing the drive for independence [8].

Kwame Nkrumah had a bitter conflict with the Asantehene and other traditional leaders in Ghana who objected to being excluded from government. In Ouagadougou, a frustrated traditional emperor, the Mogho Naba of the Mossi people, attempted to use his traditional army in a quixotic attempt to dissolve an embattled Territorial Assembly. Sir Edward Mutesa II of the Baganda quarreled with Sir Andrew Cohen, Britain's last colonial governor, about the future government of Uganda and was exiled to England where he died in poverty. Such reports were legion [9].

Hoping to "modernize" their usual mono-economies, the new African leaders often espoused an "African Socialism" where the state controlled the economy. Insisting upon the need for "national integration," in the face of a plethora of ethnic collectivities, African leaders imposed a single party system, claiming that this was close to the African "palaver." There was often some justification for these actions, since competitively engaged in the Cold War the protagonists did attempt to profit from African ethnic competition [10].

What confounded many western theorists was that whether African leaders espoused Marxism-Leninism, African and non-African socialism, capitalism or mixed capitalism and so on, their efforts failed. They rejected compromises and ignored the advice of Sir Arthur Lewis to Nkrumah, that the political-economy of the new African states should use agriculture to build their economies and should employ ethnic-based coalitions for government [11]. The result was that confusion reigned about how African leaders could and should deal with their economies and regimes.

Those anthropologists who kept abreast of conditions in Africa were not surprised by the chaos. Surprised when asked by some political scientist to deal with traditional leaders in a book dealing with political parties and national integration, Peter C. Lloyd, a specialist on the Yoruba kingdom, observed that while "the chiefs have not been in the van of the national movement, at least in recent decades ... the picture so often painted of a straight fight between elderly illiterate chiefs, living in the past, and modern Western-educated politicians is not in accord with the facts" [12].

Lloyd believed that the emergent African political leaders needed to turn the allegiance of the masses from ethnic groups to the state, and from their traditional rulers to the parliamentary leaders--especially when members of the new ruling class, by training and ways of thought, and in styles of life, were divorced from the masses. He advised politicians to recognize the loyalty of the people to their traditional leaders, and to involve the latter in the governance of the country. Above all, the politicians should not use traditional leaders only for

symbolic purposes, thereby running the risk of "destroying the prestige of the rulers just as did too close an association with the colonial administration in past decades" [13].

Joining the debate, Norman Miller warned about the need to harmonize the role of Tanzanian traditional rulers in development and governance so as to avoid ethnic conflict. He declared: "Viewed from the higher echelons of government in the new nations, the rural leader is an insignificant individual who goes about managing his local affairs and carrying out--with varying degrees of success--the policies and hopes of the government. Viewed from below, from the inner recesses of the village, the leader is a man of authority; a man who has used wealth, heredity, or personal magnetism to gain a position of influence." He argued that the rural leaders were the key to development plans in the rural areas, and warned that any "lack of initiative ... would entrench the status quo and doom the modernization plans before they begin" [14].

When asked to comment upon this article while in Ouagadougou, I described how the new state officials in the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) were devoting so much time to the problems of their states in major world capitals, that they had neither the time nor the energy to serve the rural areas. Whereas I had observed that during decolonization, many traditional leaders feared for their positions, when faced with disinterest from the capital, in 1968, they simply pitched in and helped their subjects. The politicians in Ouagadougou were too busy quarreling to deal with rural problems, with the result that the military replaced them [15].

George C. Bond, who had witnessed the transition from colonial rule to independence in North Rhodesia/Zambia, reported that disagreement about development pitted the royal houses and the "new men." When rural villagers wanted economic development, but were reluctant to pay for it, this "put pressure on all those chiefdoms leaders whose power ... [was] based primarily on popular support" [16]. Bond suggested then that "if the party-based elite was "unable to provide for local demands, the chief and the royal clan stand as a potential alternative source of leadership." When he returned to Zambia in 1973, he found that a one-party state was firmly in place and local party politicians had moved to urban centers to reap the rewards of office. Meanwhile, "internal and external forces, combined to restore the chief and his ruling clique to positions of power." This led to "the resurgence of traditional patterns of authority in the rural areas where most Zambians live, but also to the rise of new but politically conservative coalitions at the local level" [17].

By the l980s, regardless of ideology, the political economies of the African states had so deteriorated that this led to frequent military coups, political oppression, ethnic strife and economic degradation. Some of the blame lay with African governments that often "pursued economic policies or created public institutions that became impediments to their economic progress" [18]. The other part of the problem was due to Africa being the victim of a changing global economic environment. Because African economies were so heavily dependent on the export of a few primary products, any recession in the West caused them to collapse [19].

To complicate the situation, the end of the Cold War and a subsequent disinterest by both East and West in African affairs, led to Afropessimism--the almost racist notion that Africa and Africans were hopeless. Rather than consider Africa's problems as the precipitate of its turbulent change, the practices of the often embattled (and often corrupt) African leaders were blamed. The United States insisted that Africa's only solution was to adopt democracy and free

markets. American ideologues insisted that "democracy" means not only the right of people to elect their own government, but that only a democratic system can guarantee the full exercise of fundamental human rights now judged to be universal and applicable to all individuals without distinction as to age, gender, descent, religion, ethnicity, or race [20].

There is general agreement in most African countries that coups must end, corruption must be rooted out, and economies must be restored. There is less agreement among Africans about the meaning of "democracy." Many Africans believe that the larger issue of governance is related to the general conditions in African countries. Some African scholars declare that there were traditional forms of democracy, autocracy, monarchy, and oligarchy in state-organized societies as well as stateless societies in their pre-colonial history. They assert that African traditional political systems functioned, not because of their forms, but because they fulfilled felt needs in societies. According to this argument, the important factor was "political authority" derived from a "jural community" and defined as the widest grouping within which there is a moral obligation and a means ultimately to settle disputes [21].

Increasingly, African scholars insist that whereas western ideas about democracy are specifically rooted in the notion of political and social rights for individuals, the reality of Africa is still one in which "collectivities", or "ethnic" groups, rather than individuals are demanding social justice. In this context, what matters is respect for African cultures and languages, and ethnic concerns in the distribution of their countries' or world resources. These views are now being linked to the conviction that African traditional leaders and important personages should join politicians in governing African societies. Moreover, these demands are coming from urbanites as well as rural folk.

C.S. Whitaker, a student of Northern Nigerian politics, has always questioned the assumptions that there could not be a compromise in the leadership of what he has called "confrontation societies," (those having many of the mixed attributes of small urban westernized elites and rural agricultural folk largely governed by traditional leaders). Based on solid empirical research, he challenged the notion that such collaboration was neither inevitable or practical. Whitaker noted an emerging stable symbiosis of modern and traditional elements, and cited several cases of "creative adjustments" leading to what he described as "democratic reforms." Whitaker concluded that "significant elements of the traditional political system of the emirates proved to be compatible in practical terms with significant features of the modern state" [22]. He suggested that the emerging political culture of African countries would do well to take traditional elements into account. Interestingly enough, these views are now shared by some of his colleagues who worked in Nigeria [23].

Maxwell Owusu, a Ghanaian anthropologist, called attention to the implications of his study of a town in Ghana that supported the views of Whitaker. Viewing that society holistically, Owusu found as much continuity as change in Ghanaian politics. Preferring to look at the issue of governance in terms of "national unification," rather than in terms of "modernization," Owusu, focused on the struggle for power between groups. He asserted that such struggles were always present in that society, whether between traditional rulers, or between traditionalists and the new elites or other factions. The issue boils down to "the possession of wealth and its distribution and consumption to achieve or maintain high social status, prestige and social privilege. In this politico-economic competition, individuals and

groups manipulated, whenever suitable and to their advantage, a variety of symbols, beliefs, images, and ideologies, some clearly traditional and others European in origin, to advance their interests" [24]. For Owusu, then, the problem of governance in contemporary Africa was to recognize and to satisfy the goals and aspirations of different groups and their leaders. Different African societies necessitated types of governance based on compromises between types of groups and individuals.

My own study of political change in Upper Volta/Burkina Faso showed that the failure of the modern politicians to compromise with the traditional leaders in the interest of all the groups led to disaster [25]. This was true from the first president, Maurice Yameogo, through subsequent military regimes, through the assassination of Thomas Sankara, a young revolutionary officer. A perceptive reporter wrote the following obituary:

wishing to break too quickly with the `old order.'...' Sankara did not understand that the 'disinherited masses,' was still caught up in the yoke of the ancestral hierarchy. The 'working class' who until recently only listened to the emperor of the Mossi, ... did not know that they needed to be liberated [26].

The new leader, Blaise Compare, using a now familiar political ploy in a disemic-mode, doffed his military uniform and subsequently won the presidency as a civilian. He adopted a modified slogan of democracy and development, but complained that democracy could not succeed in the face of poverty and economic inequality based on the notion of inherent individual differences and unbridled political and economic competition. He authorized multipartyism, but also sought the support of traditional rulers (referring to them as representative of different national cultures). Then, as an obvious ploy to retain their support, Compaore promised the creation of a third parliamentary chamber to give representation to a large number of groups [27].

On July 31, 1993, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda permitted the installation of Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, the son of Mutesa II, as the new Kabaka of the kingdom of Buganda. Representatives of other monarchies from Swaziland, Britain, and Ethiopia were all at the ceremony to witness the rebirth of Buganda. Present also were traditional rulers from Uganda's other kingdoms of Ankole, Toro, Busoga, and Bunyoro. Cynics suggested that this was just another case of disemia, because with the 1994 general elections in the offing, Museveni hoped to reap a great deal of political good will by supporting a bill to restore the monarchies. Both the Kabaka and the president expressed a desire to work together to govern the country. At the opening of the Lukiiko (Baganda's parliament), the Kabaka promised to listen to the people so that the politics of Buganda would be to obtain food and development. He would have a crown, but the scepter would belong to the president.

President Museveni, for his part, sees no contradiction between cultural rebirth and the functioning of a modern state. He believes that cultural institutions will address national unity, mobilization, and the welfare of society. He argues that traditional leaders will help to preserve local languages and culture which are under serious assault from external forces. Some other Ugandans have been quoted as saying that the revival of these traditional institutions carries the potential for getting greater participation because of a more natural sense of self-belonging. They are reportedly tired of the poor economic and political record of centralized governments during the past thirty years, and they have been disillusioned by the modern post-colonial state

modeled after European systems. Ugandans reportedly see the European type of state as alien and the old set-up of kingdoms and chieftainships as more organic [28].

CONCLUSION

At an earlier point in its history, anthropology had the concept of a "cultural compulsive", meaning the widespread recognition that a cultural trait or institution was necessary for the survival of a society. Today Africans are demanding "democracy" characterized by free elections and the end of autocratic rule. However, there is growing recognition that Africans must be free to chose or to develop forms of governance in keeping with their local realities, and that this be linked with economic development. There is also a growing recognition that, at least for the present, traditional leaders of the component ethnic groups of African countries be involved in the governance of their societies. When and how this happens must be a function of local conditions, but the modalities must permit dialogue and accommodations with global norms.

Given the false starts and stops that accompany all change, and a very anthropological truism that not all mutations succeed, no one can really tell whether the new attempts of contemporary Africans to create political systems out of the checkered cloth of traditional authorities and elected ones will succeed. Owusu holds that "African democracy may require the integration of indigenous methods of village cooperation with innovative forms of government, combining the power of universal rights with the uniqueness of each district's or nation's own customs and respected traditions" [29].

Fortunately, Congressman Harry Johnston (D-Florida), chairman of the sub-committee on Africa of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, appears to have come to a comparable solution. He has called for a new comprehensive US strategy for evaluating democracy in Africa that takes "a broad, flexible view of what democracy means in the African context", that encourages African nations to "develop a full range of democratic institutions" in addition to multi-party elections, representative legislatures, a free press, civilian control of the military, an independent judiciary, minority protection and that links U.S. Foreign aid to a country's democratic progress [30]. My suspicion is that this will not be possible unless the "unseen hand" of market forces can show our global village that it has novel ways that would permit the resources of our planet to be used in the interest of all humankind.

Notes

1. For an interesting discussion of this question, see Carter, Gwendolen M., Independence for Africa. New York: Praeger, 1990. pp. 8, 91.
2. Moore, Sally Falk, "Changing Perspectives on a Changing Africa: The Work of Anthropology," in , Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, Africa and the Disciplines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. p. 3.
3. Geertz, Clifford, ed., Old Societies and Old States. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1963. p. 109.
4. Ibid., pp. 119, 535.
5. Apter, David, Ghana in Transition. New York: Atheneum, 1968. p. 544.

6. St. Clair, Drake, "Traditional Authority and Social Action in Former British West Africa," Human Organization, V. 19, pp. 150-58 ,1965.
7. Gramsci, Antonio, in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., Selections from the Prison: Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. NY: International Publishers, 1971, pp. 243ff.
8. Chazan, Naomi, Robert Mortimer, John Ravenhill, and Donald Rothchild, eds., Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa. 2 Ed., Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992, p. 7.
9. Wilson, H.S., African Decolonization. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
10. Decalo, Samuel, Psychoses of Power: African Personal Dictatorship. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989.
11. Lewis, W. Arthur, Politics in West Africa. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1967, pp. 42, 64.
12. Lloyd, Peter C. in James S. Coleman and Carl G. Rosberg Jr., eds., Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa. Nigeria: Background to Nationalism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, pp. 382-412.
13. Ibid.
14. Miller, Norman, "The 'Paradox' of Rural Leadership: A Comment," Journal of Modern African Studies, V. 6, N. 2, pp. 185-198,1970.
15. Skinner, Elliott P., "The `Paradox' of Rural Leadership: A Comment." Journal of Modern African Studies, V. 6, N. 2, pp. 199-201, 1970.
16. Bond, George C., The Politics of Change in a Zambian Community. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 160.
17. Ibid.
18. Kitchen, Helen, "Some Guidelines on Africa for the Next President." Washington DC: CSIS., Vol. 10, No.1, p. 21, 1988.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
20. Boahen, A. Adu, African Perspectives on Colonialism. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987.
21. Uya, O.E. , African Diaspora. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1987, p. 39.
22. Whitaker, C. Sylvester, The Politics of Tradition and Continuity in Northern Nigeria. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 467.
23. Sklar, Richard L., "Problems of Democracy in Africa". Paper Prepared for Second Sino-U.S. African Studies Conference, Malibu, California, January 11-15, 1991.
24. Owusu, Maxwell. The Uses and Abuses of Political Power. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 325; Owusu, Maxwell, "Democracy and Africa--A View from the Village," The Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 369-396. 1991.
25. I had the good fortune to have been in rural Upper Volta studying the political organization of the Mossi people during the decolonization process, and in August 1960, I received the first visa ever granted to a non-citizen to visit independent Upper Volta. Later, when doing urban fieldwork in Ouagadougou in 1964, I visited the rural areas as often as possible. I continued this fieldwork while serving as United States Ambassador to the Republic of Upper Volta from 1966 to 1969. What impressed me during this entire period, and what still impresses me, is the continued role of traditional authorities. See: Skinner, Elliott P., "Political Conflict and Revolution in an African Town", American

Anthropologist, 74 1974.; Skinner, Elliott P., The Mossi of Burkina Faso. Prospect Heights, IL.: Waveland Press, 1964/1989; Skinner, E., African Urban Life: The Transformation of Ouagadougou. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

26. Quoted in Skinner, Elliott P., "Sankara and the Burkinabe Revolution: Charisma, Local and Global Dimensions," Journal of Modern African Studies, V. 26, N. 3, pp. 434-455, 1989.

27. FBIS-AFR-92-004, 7 Jan. 1992, p. 25.

28. Information for this section comes from the library of Ali A. Mazrui at SUNY, Binghamton, New York.

29. Owusu, Maxwell, "Democracy and Africa--A View from the Village," The Journal of Modern African Studies, V. 30, N. 3, p. 384, 1991.

30. Johnston, Harry, "Congressional Hearing Transcript". US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee's Sub-Comittee on Africa, p. 57 1993.

African societies today have two levels of government: the indigenous organization, which pertains to local groups, and the national government of the independent nation-states. The relationship between the two levels is complex and has led to serious incompatibilities and conflicts. It has become usual to classify the multitude of indigenous forms of African government into three main categories, conventionally known as bands, tribes, and kingdoms. Bands are relatively few and are limited to the societies with economies based on hunting and gathering, especially those of the Bushmen of the Ka