# Patterns and Theories of Traditional Resurgence in Tropical Africa*

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Despite variation across the continent, most African countries have experienced a dualism of structures of power since their independence, if not since their colonization, with pre-colonial institutions competing first with colonial and then with post-colonial states for the allegiance of their citizens (Ekeh 1975). This dualism, for which Richard Sklar (1993, 1999a, 1999b) coined the terms "mixed polity" and "mixed government," has at times been formally recognized, and at times denied or repressed by post-colonial authorities. Countries like Malawi, Nigeria, or Botswana, for example, are among those that have typically provided "traditional" structures of power with some level of formal recognition and incorporation. At the other extreme, Burkina, Tanzania, and Mozambique were once more repressive, either banning or refusing to recognize traditional institutions.

Whether heretofore beneficiaries of state tolerance or victims of its repression, numerous indigenous political structures appear to have experienced some resurgence since the beginning of the 1990s. Several governments have passed constitutional reforms restoring, recognizing, or providing traditional leaders with a measure of incorporation. Chiefs have set up their own trade unions or have seen their role increase in more informal ways. Elsewhere, traditional authorities or tradition-based grass-root organizations have taken over, with mixed results, some functions of the state such as the provision of justice and the administration of police, both in substitution and in complement to the state. Claims for the restoration of traditional monarchs have also been heard, while in some cases, clanic structures have provided the partial foundation for secessionist claims.

Catherine Boone (1998) defines the post-Cold War reconfiguration of the African state as the "new forms of social mobilization and new patterns of state-society relations that have emerged" as states have "responded to the erosion of the old political order." Most studies of African state reconfiguration, however, have concentrated on the reaction of state elites to their new environment (Clapham 1996, Villalón and Huxtable 1998, Joseph 1999), while the resurgence of indigenous structures has been relatively neglected, despite unambiguously qualifying as a new or renewed form of social mobilization and pattern of state-society relations.[1] African traditional systems exert actual power. Hence, their resurgence must be investigated as a dimension

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1    With the significant exception of Richard Sklar's work.

of the ongoing reconfiguration of power across the continent. What are its extent, nature, roots, meaning, promises and limitations ? What explains its variance across the region, with some countries witnessing multiple rebirths of traditional systems and others none ? This paper suggests a first and still broadly speculative set of answer to these questions.

## Patterns of Resurgence

Traditional resurgence takes on many forms and occurs at various levels of social organization. It ranges from the invocation of alleged traditional norms by local self-help or self-defense groups, to the effective restoration of past kingdoms as quasi-state units, including the promotion of chiefly status and functions, and increased competition between chiefs and local state structures. Over the last decade, for example, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda have revised their constitutions in ways that recognize and increase the political weight of traditional institutions and their leaders. In Ghana, the 1992 constitution guarantees the institution of chieftaincy with its traditional councils, establishes a National House of Chiefs and restricts the state from appointing or refusing to recognize chiefs. Ghanaian authorities also reserve 30% of the seats of District Assemblies for chiefs and retrocede 22.5% of revenue from Stool Lands to them (Ray 1998), although it limits their participation in politics in other ways. The Asantehene's role in economic and development activities also appears to be on the rise. The Otumfuo [another title for the Asantehene] Fund provides educational infrastructure, teacher training and scholarships for Ashanti subjects. Its fund-raising activities also suggest a quasi-fiscal dimension to the resurgent kingdom, as Ashantis are invited to contribute financially to the Fund. Other Ghanaian traditional leaders are also involved with the government and UN organizations in AIDS education and prevention programs across the country.

In South Africa, the 1996 ANC-driven constitution provides a significant level of protection and incorporation to traditional chiefs, especially in view of the association of many of them with the apartheid regime, whose homeland policy relied quite heavily on chiefs for local administration (see Mamdani 1996). The new constitution recognizes and protects the "institution, status and role of traditional leadership, according to customary law" and allows for the creation of national, provincial and local councils of traditional leaders. Chiefs have not been shy in trying to exert their power at the national level, although they regularly feel threatened by the democratizing institutions of the post-apartheid state. In October 2000, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) forced the Mbeki government to postpone municipal elections and to convene a committee to address their grievance over the redistricting of municipalities and the resulting control of rural lands. This suggests that "traditional leaders have expanded their scope of authority" in the post-apartheid era (Williams 2000). In Kwazulu-Natal, for example, Zulu chiefs share power in a manner virtually indistinguishable from the local officials of the state. Kwazulu-Natal chiefs occupy ex-officio 20% of the seats on Kwazulu regional councils, a number adopted so that each of the estimated 260 traditional leaders in the province would have a position (Williams 2000). This incorporation has allowed traditional leaders to expand their roles to new domains such as development projects and fund-raising. As Williams (2000) recounts from one of his field interviews, "the *inkosi* [chief] told us that bringing development to the community has been his most important duty since 1994 when he and 'his' community first 'learned' about development". Williams concludes that the "'idea' of traditional leadership in rural areas [is] especially vibrant and meaningful" (2000).

In Uganda, the constitution was first amended in 1993 in order to legalize the coronation of the Kabaka of Buganda, Mutebi II, then fully redrawn in 1995 to recognize the institution of traditional leaders. Although this recognition is limited to cultural matters, Buganda (Uganda's largest and most articulated traditional kingdom) has so far experienced a resurgence that is well beyond both the spirit and the letter of the constitution and has clear political dimensions (Englebert 2002). The kingdom has redeveloped its political institutions and boasts a full-fledged government, a parliament, development agencies, local county representatives and "ambassadors" abroad. Its annual budget is in excess of $1.5m with revenues derived from the rent of its buildings, commercial enterprises such as a radio station, and quasi-taxation, including the sale of certificates of support to the kingdom, the solicitation of tributes to the king by each of the 52 clan heads, the payment of fees for identity documents and census purposes, and a forced investment program. Although the kingdom has so far been unsuccessful in its lobbying efforts for the introduction of a federal system in Uganda in which it wants to be a federated state, it continues to make demands for greater political incorporation and carries substantial weight on the political scene, despite recent corruption scandals. Uganda's kingdoms of Bunyoro and Toro

have also re-established their institutions, while Ankole's rebirth has been hampered mostly by the fact that president Museveni hails from this region and has refused to recognize the newly appointed king. The Ankole population, having experienced a social revolution akin to Rwanda's overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy in 1959, also appears more reticent to endorse a return to monarchical forms (see Doornbos 1978). Most interesting, however, has been the multiplicity of political entrepreneurs from groups in Uganda without a strong tradition of centralized statehood or kingship who have claimed the status of traditional leaders in order to benefit from the recognition granted by the constitution. For example, Dr. Martin Aliker claimed to be crowned "big chief" of the Acholi in March 1993, although the Acholi never had such traditional leaders. The Bakonzo of Kasese district in the Rwenzori mountains also voiced their desire to re-establish their kingdom in January 1994, despite the fact that they did not have a monarchy until 1964 when the Rwenzuri kingdom was created in reaction to the perceived territorial ambitions of the neighboring Toro kingdom. In September 1994, it was even reported that advocates of the restoration of the Rwenzuri kingdom and the reinstatement of King Charles Wesley Iremangoma had started training a private army and collecting taxes. In 2000, the Iteso of Uganda and Kenya jointly crowned a new king, the Emiromor.[2]

Michela Wrong (2000) reports a somewhat similar occurrence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She tells the story of self-proclaimed King Mizele of the Kongo kingdom, a commoner who set up a royal court in the Makala district of Kinshasa in the latter years of the Mobutu regime in an attempt to recreate the ancient Kongo kingdom. Before his kingdom was banned and he was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in jail by a military court of the Kabila government in July 1998 on charges of "plotting to overthrow an established government," Mizele had begun building the "structures of a state within a state" (Wrong 2000). With several thousand followers, his kingdom was issuing ID cards and levying taxes. It reportedly had a government, a central bank with its governor (though it did not appear to be issuing any currency), a police force and an army.

In Zambia too, the 1990s witnessed the resurgence of a polity, the Lozi of Barotseland, who had retained some autonomy under British colonial rule but had failed in their demands for separate independence in 1961. The Lozi agreed to independence as part of Zambia under an agreement that their kingdom would remain autonomous and maintain its privileges in the new state, but the Kaunda government revoked this agreement in 1969. Thanks in part to the cooptation of some of their leaders, Lozi opposition remained rather tacit until the introduction of multi-party politics in 1991 when they overwhelmingly voted for the opposition Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD). The MMD government did not, however, accede to their demands, leading to rumors in 1994 that the Lozi were "arming themselves with heavy weapons" (Pitsch 1999). The same year, they began judiciary proceedings for the recognition of their claims for autonomy/secession. In 1993, they set up the opposition National Party under the leadership of a member of their royal family and gave the government 28 days to respond to their demands for autonomy or they would opt for secession. They did not secede, but stoned President Chiluba's motorcade during a trip to Batrotseland in 1994, after which some 3,000 of them took up arms in mistaken anticipation that their ruler would be arrested. Some heavy weaponry of apparent UNITA origins was seized in Barotseland in 1995, including 30 rocket launchers. Lozi activism intensified in 1998 with the creation of the Barotse Patriotic Front (BPF), which called for self-determination of Barotseland and threatened military conflict. The BPF also supports Lozi separatists in the Caprivi strip of Namibia and has called for a "greater Barotseland" (Pitsch 1999).

Somaliland and Puntland, two post-cold-war African state or proto-state formations, are also witnessing significant integrations of traditional clanic structures in state governance. Although it is usually considered to be derived from a partition based on colonial lines since, unlike the rest of Somalia, it was colonized by England (and was actually independent by itself for 5 days before merging with Italian Somalia in 1960), Somaliland's structure of governance is considerably based on traditional clanic elements and can be partly considered a case of tradition-based secession. It has a Council of Elders in addition to a national assembly, and is the institutional expression of the Northern clans that had been discriminated against under the Siad Barre regime. The case of Puntland is different because it does not wish to secede from Somalia, instead having attained autonomy as a way to build a new quasi-federal system from the bottom. Based upon the power structures of the Majerteen sub-clan, Puntland is a case of what Baker (2000) calls "opportunistic disengagement" from the state. However, Somaliland and Puntland are by no means

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2    Evidence from this section was drawn from the Ugandan press, and specifically *The Monitor*, 27 August 1993; *The New Vision*, 10 January 1994; and *The Sunday Vision*, 11 September 1994.

traditional state formations, and some traditional chiefs seem opposed to the Somaliland government's wishes for secession.[3]

Cameroon provides an interesting contrast to Zambia's and Somalia's ongoing confrontations between state and resurgent systems. Here, the state seems to have entered into an unusual alliance with local traditional elites, largely reminiscent of the colonial system of indirect rule (although that part of Cameroon was under the more direct French type of colonial administration).[4] Abdoulaye Ahmadou , the *Lamido* (sultan) of Rey Bouba, a kingdom founded some 150 years ago which includes the cities of Rey Bouba and Tcholliré in the Mayo-Rey region, has indeed established a private militia which has been known to attack opponents to the Biya regime and to illegally detain and torture them (Amnesty International 1998, UN Commission on Human Rights 1999). Ahmadou is a member of the ruling party and his son, the successor to the throne, is secretary general of the Ministry of Agriculture in Yaoundé.[5] In the Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, some traditional chiefs have joined *mai-mai* militias in fighting Rwandan occupation in apparent alliance with the Kinshasa government. Other Kivu chiefs have adopted a more collaborative attitude with respect to their powerful neighbors, however, such as the Mwami of Buzi, Raymond Sangara, who attended the Sun City Inter-Congolese Dialogue in 2002 as a delegate of the RCD-Goma rebel movement. The government delegation too included some traditional chiefs.

Reflecting neither a willingness to collaborate with state authorities, nor to break away from the state, the case of the King of Rwanda is unique to the extent that Rwanda benefits from a unified pre-colonial history as a kingdom. Deposed and exiled since 1959, King Kigeli V has made no secret since the 1994 overthrow of the Hutu regime of his desire to return to the throne and bring Rwanda back to its pre-colonial monarchical nature. There appears to be some measure of support for such a system in the country where social polarization has remained high since the 1994 genocide (Ofcansky 2000). The Kagame government is strongly resisting this trend, however. The Speaker of the National Assembly, Joseph Kabuye Sebarenzi, was forced to resign and fled into exile to Uganda in January 2000 after having supported royalist forces and distributed music and poetry calling for the restoration of Kigeli. Rumors of the existence of an "Army of the King," allegedly composed of Rwandan Patriotic Army deserters, have abounded since 1999, although Kigeli has denied knowledge of it, and, in the same year, students at the university of Butare established a monarchical association. Despite his denials of active political involvement in his own country, the king traveled to the DRC to meet with Laurent Kabila just a few weeks before the latter's assassination in January 2001. The king, however, has so far failed to articulate a credible political program for his return home and it is unclear how the monarchy could, in practice, reduce social tensions.

Enjoying perhaps a lesser profile but nonetheless quite prevalent across the continent are the increasingly numerous associations of chiefs set up, unions-like, to defend the interests of their members, sometimes in consort with the state, and other times in opposition to it. Traditional resurgence is no longer defined here as the revival of a specific political system, but as the rise of chiefs as a class. These cases include the *Association des Chefs Traditionnels du Togo*, an instrument of support to Gnassingbé Eyadéma's regime (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 2000) and the *Association des Chefs Traditionnels* of Côte d'Ivoire which was set up in 1999 with about 60 chiefs, also as a "support club" for President Henri Konan Bédié.[6] It is unclear what its fate has been since the overthrow of Bédié later that year. Chad's Association of Traditional Chiefs similarly appears to serve as a mouthpiece for the regime. In Niger, the association of traditional chiefs, which functioned as an agency of the state during the regime of Seyni Kountché (1974-1987), appears now to have become an NGO and to be active as a civil society organization. In Benin too, West and Kloeck-Jenson (1999) have noted an increase in the role of chiefs. Once-presidential candidate Akande Olofinji, who also serves as Vizir of the King of Ketou, set up an Association of Kings of Benin in 1991.[7] A *Conseil d'Administration des Familles Royales d'Abomey* (CAFRA), representing twelve Abomey royal families, was also recently set up under the leadership of Joseph Langanfin, the official representative of the Abomey kings. Langanfin presided over the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Abomey King Glele's death in 1989.[8]

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3      See *Africa Confidential*, 18 May 2001, 42(10):8.

4      I am grateful to Nicolas van de Walle for having brought this case to my attention.

5      See *Almanach de Bruxelles*, 1997 (www.almanach.be).

6      *Le Démocrate Plus*, *Bi-Hebdomadaire du PDCI-RDA*, 6 July 1999.

7      I am grateful to Michel Welmond for bringing this case to my attention.

Benin also provided the venue for the World Conference of Kings, Queens, Traditional Chiefs and Religious Leaders on Conflict Prevention in the Twenty-First Century in August 1999.[9] The conference was organized by Africa-Cultures International Institute, a Beninese NGO for the promotion of traditional systems.

The resurgence of chiefs as a class is frequently embodied in the creation of national and regional Councils or Houses of Traditional Leaders, whose powers are however usually limited to "traditional" matters such issues of chiefly successions. Both Ghana and South Africa have provided for such councils in their new constitutions. Zambia reintroduced a National House of Chiefs in 1996 and Namibia set up a Council of Traditional Leaders in June 1998.

Sometimes, traditional resurgence is more a matter of grass-root organization than of chiefly behavior, an invocation of traditional principles to support contemporary forms of collective action. In Tanzania, self-help defense groups named *sungusungu* have gained prominence over the last decade. With traditional origins as anti-cattle raiding groups, they have taken over police and judiciary functions and even substitute for the army on occasion (Mwaikusa 1995). Self-defense groups based on traditional identities have also surfaced in Sierra Leone's civil war as civilians have found themselves squeezed between the exactions and violence of the rebel and government forces.[10] Local traditional ties appear to have been critical in the formation of these civil defense militias. In 1993, for example, traditional hunter guilds in Koinadugu District led an offensive against the RUF. Among the Mende, initiates of a male secret society, the Poro, were used to guard refugee settlements, enforce curfews and provide protection to the towns. Best known, however, is the Kamajor militia, which was formed by Chief Hinga Norman of the Gbongor chiefdom in the early 1990s (Muana 1997). The loyalty and effectiveness of the Kamajor fighters was such that in 1995 the international security firm Executive Outcomes cooperated with them to fight the RUF. Hirsch (2001) estimates that the Kamajors contributed to bringing the RUF to the negotiating table for the Abidjan Agreement at the end of 1996. The Kamajors also protected people in Mende areas during the 1996 elections. Eventually, Hinga Norman was made deputy minister of defense by President Kabbah after the elections (Muana 1997).[11] Local chiefs were also involved in civilian efforts to bring about peace in Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s, not least through the Council of Elders and Religious Leaders (Turay 2000).

Finally, the resurgence of tradition takes on at times a more religious guise. Moves towards the introduction of S*haria*, or Islamic law, in northern Nigeria since 2000, are not only inspired by religious claims but also represent an attempt by traditional northern elite to avoid marginalization by the Obasanjo administration. The Sokoto Caliphate was under a form of *Sharia* until the independence of Nigeria, and its reintroduction is claimed by some as a defense of Northern identity, representing as it does a crucial foundation of Hausa-Fulani elites' power. It comes as no surprise then that several Northern traditional leaders have endorsed its restoration, including Mustapha Jokolo, the Emir of Gwandu, and Maccido, the Sultan of Sokoto.[12] Religion is an important source of traditional power in Senegal as well. Abdoulaye Wade has shown the rising leverage of the Muslim *Mourides* brotherhood, Senegal's traditional form of political power, when he traveled to Touba, their holy city, the day after his election to the presidency in 2000, to pay his respects to the Caliph General.[13]

## Theoretical Speculations

What determines whether or not traditional institutional forms resurface ? And, when they do, what factors account for the shape they take and the weight they carry ? Finally, to what extent do they contribute to the reconfiguration of the African state and what role can they play in its future ? I begin by addressing the first two questions simultaneously through a discussion of the relationship between traditional

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8    See "Rois d'Afrique," www.tamarin.com/kings.

9    United Nations. Press Release SG/SM/7107, 23 August 1999.

10   I am grateful to Nicola Wood for having brought the following examples to my attention.

11   Although they gained prominence as a civil defense organization during the war, the Kamajors were not themselves immune from committing abuses towards civilians, as documented by Human Rights Watch

     (see http://allafrica.com/stories.printable/200005310265.html).

12   See *Africa Confidential*, 3 March 2000,41(5):1-2.

13   See *Africa Confidential*, 9 June 2000, 41(12):5-6.

resurgence and state strength, democratization, economic restructuring and globalization. I then investigate the extent to which traditional resurgence can be construed as a dimension of state reconfiguration, and I conclude with a look at whether indigenous structures are potential building blocks for the next generation of African states.

## The Paradox of State Strength

One would intuitively expect that weak states are more likely to witness resurgences because they are less able to repress competing institutions and because their populations experience greater need for substitute forms of collective action. Yet, a surprising dimension of the evidence presented in this paper is the relative lack of resurgence of tradition in collapsed or failed states. With the exceptions of the Kamajors in Sierra Leone and the more ambiguous cases of secessionist Somaliland and Puntland, there are very few examples of resurgent indigenous structures in the context of failed or collapsed states across Africa. There is little evidence, therefore, for Bruce Baker's (2000) claim that "where there is a weak, collapsing authority, those left without provision by that authority will, in 'opportunistic disengagement,' take advantage of the lack of social control." Nor is there much evidence supporting the idea that resurgence would be stronger in states which Jeffrey Herbst (2000) labels as having weak national designs, those whose "political geographies make it exceptionally difficult to consolidate power." Herbst expects that "African states with difficult geographies [will] face the continual problem of a relatively large number of outlying groups that are not only spatially distinct but that also can be mobilized around ethnic and cultural symbols that can compete with the state" (2000:146). But most of the countries he classifies in this group – Angola, DRC, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania – do not appear among the hotbeds of resurgence. On the contrary, relatively strong states like South Africa and Uganda have so far provided the context for the furthest-reaching restorations. What accounts for this paradox ?

A first possible level of explanation lies with the cultural profile of the resurgent groups themselves, irrespective of the strength of the state. The political culture of the traditional systems, including the extent of their effective survival and their propensity for adaptation to new environments, should affect the success of any revival attempt. David Apter (1960) had already compared the "instrumental" tradition of Buganda to the "consummatory" traditionalism of Ashanti in order to explain the political success of the former and failure of the latter at the time of pre-independence arrangements. Instrumental systems can innovate, "spreading the blanket of tradition upon change itself," whereas consummatory ones, built upon a more complex equilibrium of multiple functions, are vulnerable to change (Apter 1960).[14] This contrast still applies, to some extent, to the different degrees of resurgence of Buganda and Ashanti, but could probably be generalized across more countries. Whether or not the instrumentality of traditionalism is still the relevant variable, political culture (and its degree of entrepreneurialism) probably affects the extent of the resurgence of pre-colonial structures of power. Therefore, those groups that have retained sufficient effective existence and that display centralized, dynamic and opportunistic cultural features are more likely to turn state collapse and economic retrenchment to their own benefit. This could explain the relative lack of traditional resurgence during the Liberian civil war, for example, as most Liberian indigenous structures display stateless political cultures (Morrison et al. 1989). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, it may partly be the lack of preservation of the pre-colonial systems, either because of the extensive slave trade in the case of the Bakongo, or because of the crushing nature of the Belgian colonial state (Young 1994, Hochschild 1998), that has so far prevented further resurgence. This variable could also account for variations in resurgence within countries. In Uganda, for example, the Karimojang, a group with a stateless and anarchical political culture based on raids and violence, has failed to rise in substitution to the state and to develop its own institutions of collective action, although successive Ugandan governments have adopted a hands-off approach to this difficult region.

Colonial culture may also be relevant. It is hard not to notice, indeed, that Anglophone countries are experiencing greater resurgence than their Francophone or Portuguese-speaking counterparts. It could be that British indirect administration contributed to preserving the existence and integrity of some groups whereas French direct rule was more emasculating. But there may well also be a Buckingham effect at play. Borrowing the political toolbox of the former colonial overlord, Anglophone Africans find monarchical and chiefly traditions to be useful means of political resistance or advancement. Their French-speaking counterparts, on the other

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14    In the 1950s already, James Coleman too had suggested that different traditional cultural features affected the extent to which traditional groups became nationalist in the post-colonial era (see Sklar 1994).

hand, have typically proceeded to reconfigure domestic power with the organization of sovereign national conferences, broadly patterned after the French revolution's Estates General, a foundation of political legitimacy in their respective colonial order. In short, the importation and appropriation of colonial political traditions fosters the apparent resurgence of African tradition in Anglophone countries while possibly down-playing it among French-speaking ones where collaboration between chiefs and state authorities is more common.

It is also possible that strong states are more confident in their own institutions and stability, and are therefore more likely to tolerate the rise of alternative sources of identity. Thabo Mbeki's good-natured payment of a one-cow fine for missing the wedding of the King of Lesotho in 1999 illustrates both his willingness to acknowledge the power of tradition and his humoring of chiefs. The counterpart to this tolerance, however, is that strong states usually limit traditional resurgence to the cultural sphere or to the bifurcated traditional functions of local land allocation and dispute settlements. The Ugandan constitution specifically states, for example, that traditional leaders are cultural institutions, and the Ghanaian National House of Chiefs can only address issues of customary law and nominations and revocations of chiefs. The South African case is slightly more ambiguous, although the 1996 constitution confines chiefs to traditional functions at the national level. All three countries simultaneously created competing local state institutions as they recognized traditional leaders. Weak states, on the other hand, challenge the rise of such alternative institutions, if they still can. In doing so, they reduce the possibility of actual resurgence within their boundaries, but they also magnify the likelihood that such resurgence, if it takes place, will be political rather than cultural. The Kamajors's participation in Sierra Leone's civil war, the association of some traditional chiefs with the *Mai*-Mai of Kivu, the *sungusungu* role in community self-defense in Tanzania, and the repressive functions of the Sultan of Rey Bouba in Cameroon (not a weak state *per se* but one that has much weakened in the 1990s), support this approach. These cases are exceptions, however, in that they represent somewhat violent versions of tradition. In a situation of state collapse or failure, politics is usually biased in favor of organizations with a comparative advantage in violence, such as warlords, rather than traditional chiefs. In Kivu, for example, *Mai*-Mai chiefs are the exception. More common is the erosion of the position of traditional chiefs within their own communities to the benefit of local landlords.[15]

One can also think of certain cases of traditional resurgence, such as Barotseland's separatism in Zambia, as instances of "cultural withdrawal," an expression which Bruce Baker (2000) uses to refer to collective withdrawal from authority and community, a form of escape from the state. If such cases are indeed instances of disengagement from the state and challenge to its hegemonic project, then it should come as no surprise to see them positively associated with state strength. The stronger the state, the more successful its hegemonic pursuit, and the more likely political challenge is to take place through withdrawal. Baker (2000) also sees "localized self-help groups" as instances of cultural withdrawal.

Finally, the emphasis on state strength may in fact obfuscate the extent to which traditional resurgence depends on the failure of nation- rather than state-building. A country like Uganda, for example, has witnessed considerable strengthening of its state over the last 15 years, but its society remains significantly polarized and cannot be said to have successfully integrated as a nation. The Democratic Republic of Congo, on the other hand, despite all its abuses and weaknesses, has undergone a remarkable process of fermentation of a nationalist sentiment (Bustin 1999), addly simultaneous however, with the presence of parochial identities. When the project of national construction is more successful, there is less need or room for resurgence if we assume that resurgence is partly a quest for community. This is consistent with Chabal's (1994) suggestion that the creation of unity was more successful in states "with no obviously dominant group" such as Tanzania, Cameroon and Togo. The resurgence of tradition could then be a function of the failure to imagine a post-colonial community, which may in turn depend on relative group dominance.

With the relationship between state strength and traditional resurgence appearing mostly misleading, I now turn to three alternative hypotheses, each with several possible causations. The first one relates the extent of resurgence to the level of democratization of the state. In the second, resurgence is a function of changing economic circumstances. Finally, the third one looks at the effects of external factors such as the agendas of aid donors, the availability of diasporas, and the possibilities for exposure afforded by globalization.

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15    IRIN Update No. 665 for Central and Eastern Africa, 6 May 1999 (www.saep.org).

## Democratization and Traditional Resurgence

There is a broad timing concurrence between the resurgence of tradition and the spread of democratic experiments in Africa, both of which have followed the end of the Cold War in 1989.[16] This parallel may be partly accounted for by the fact that the relative democratization of several African countries has opened up their public space, with traditional groups, like other groups in society, regaining voice in the process. Laakso and Olukoshi (1996) see this expansion of the public space as having led to the "re-birth and flowering of latent ethnic, religious and other popular forms of identity." Based on their argument, one could link the resurgence of tradition to this increased salience of ethnicity. As ethnic identities gain prominence, so do the forms of political organization more traditionally associated with them. This perspective may account for the political resurgence of entire polities and their elites, such as the Baganda in Uganda or the Lozi of Zambia, both of whom have resurfaced in partly democratizing, and partly conflictual, environments.

Another version of this argument (alluded to in the previous section) highlights the constitutive elements of society that indigenous structures embody in contrast to the failed project of post-colonial national unity. As Marina Ottaway (1999) puts it, while democratization implies a devolution of power to "we, the people," it also begs the question of who "we" are, opening up opportunities for redefinition of collective identities. This approach reinforces Terrence Ranger's (1983) theory that the resurgence – arguably a form of re-invention – of tradition could be construed as a reaction to the repression of the colonial and post-colonial regimes. As the post-colonial state comes under pressure to reform, it is increasingly unable to prevent the creation of neo-traditional identity as a tool for the affirmation of the self as a political unit, for the discovery of "new ways to make a new society" (Ranger 1983:237). To some extent then, democratization lays bare the failure of the post-colonial African state to promote identity and facilitates efforts to return to traditional communities or to imagine new ones (see Chabal 1994:47). The increased salience of Zulu identity in South Africa's post-apartheid transition may support this hypothesis, as does the revival of Ashanti identity – repressed since independence – in democratic Ghana. But this approach may also contribute an explanation to the rise of local chiefs across many parts of the continent, assuming the latter are still perceived as genuine representatives of the political self at the local level (see van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1999).

A more complex view of the relationship between democratic transitions and traditional resurgence suggests, however, that chiefly structures may be threatened rather than bolstered by democratization, because of their own lack of democratic credentials and because the new institutional apparatus that usually accompanies democratic transitions, tends to compete with their authority. Bringing about a potential erosion of the power of the chiefs, democratization forces them to scramble to retain their relevance. This raises their salience, thereby giving the impression of resurgence when in fact they are fighting extinction, and may also raise their substantive influence if they successfully adapt to the new institutions. In South Africa's Kwazulu-Natal province, for example, the chiefs saw the construction of new institutions (particularly the local governments) by the ANC-controlled state as a threat and "demanded to be represented on the councils" (Williams 2000). They were able to react to the threat, adjust to the new circumstances, and eventually extract concessions from the state largely because the Zulus were highly and occasionally violently mobilized through the Inkhata Freedom Party, which led the ANC to be rather accommodating. The role of chiefs in Kwazulu-Natal has thus increased as a function of their success in coping with democratization, rather than as a by-product of democratization itself (Williams 2000). Compare this with the situation in Niger where chiefs have not been as successful in riding the waves of institutional change, although they face similar pressures. Niger's chiefs, who exert less leverage vis-à-vis the state than their South African counterparts, have taken on greater roles in service delivery at the local level over the last decade, but have so far been unable to resist the democratization and decentralization policies that plan for the establishment of elected local councils in rural areas and that will give these local authorities jurisdiction over their traditional domain.[17] In Nigeria, the move towards the adoption of Sharia law in the northern states is also an indication of the extent to which Haussa-Fulani elites are threatened by the regional shift in power consequent to democratization.

If traditional resurgence is a consequence or a side-effect of democratization, however, the question arises as to why it has not occurred equally in all democratizing countries. One variable to consider is

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16    See Bratton and van de Walle (1997) on Africa's democratic experiments.

17    Pan-African News Agency (PANA), 16 February 2001 (www.allafrica.com).

the extent to which traditional institutions themselves were preserved and maintained their historical legitimacy in the colonial period. Mamdani (1996) argues that the bifurcation of the colonial state turned chiefs into its instruments of rural control and repression, leaving them with few claims to build upon in the 1990s. In some cases, however, colonial authorities granted traditional systems a large measure of autonomy, allowing for circumstances in which collaboration with the colonizers did not result in substantial losses of legitimacy. Chabal (1994) mentions the emirates of Northern Nigeria and the Muslim brotherhoods of Senegal as cases in point. In view of these latter observations, one can hypothesize that democratization is more likely to promote traditional resurgence in countries where traditional systems kept a greater degree of autonomy under colonial rule. The Lozi of Zambia, which remained quite powerful under the British (Ranger 1983), certainly provide a case in point, as do the Mossi of Burkina Faso, who were too institutionally weakened by the French to remain a meaningful post-colonial political force, and who do not appear to have experienced a similar resurgence as a kingdom.

Finally, the position of traditional institutions in the structures of power *before* the democratization pressures of the 1990s may also matter. If chiefs and other traditional hierarchies were already incorporated in the state, then democratization, with its challenge of state structures, is likely to weaken their position rather than promote it. There is some evidence that in countries where structures of power are based on tradition, democratization has led to a relative decline of the influence of chiefs. In Botswana, for example, power has shifted from chiefs towards the government, as the former lost some control over land (Ray *et al*. 1997). In addition, a task force has been set up to review the function of the House of Chiefs, which some have criticized as irrelevant. Members of the House of Chiefs have complained that their institution is being ignored and several have abandoned their titles for more prestigious and lucrative professions. The House's chairman, Kgosi Batawa II, noted the declining interest among chiefs themselves and what seemed to be mere lip service from the government regarding the chieftaincy (Owino 2000). In Lesotho too, chiefs have had "gradually declining powers" as the country has struggled to maintain its monarchy throughout the 1990s and as the government considers the development of new local authorities independent from them (Ray *et al*. 1997).

## The Economy and Traditional Resurgence

Not only has traditional resurgence paralleled African processes of democratization, it has also come in the wake of the economic restructuring of African states, the building blocks of which have been the economic crisis that began in the 1970s and the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) promoted by the World Bank since the mid-1980s. The economic crisis and the consequent retrenchment of the state promoted by adjustment programs have arguably led to an increase in informal economic activity, further reliance on subsistence farming and, generally, a greater need to fend for oneself. This environment has in turn promoted the rise of grass-root organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other forms of local associations which have attempted to substitute for the state's provision of certain services, such as public safety, education and local infrastructure (Semboja and Therkildsen 1995). In Nigeria, for example, Eghosa Osaghae (1995) has noted an increase in ethnic associations in the wake of adjustment programs. As with democratic transitions, the rise of ethnic solidarities can find an expression in the revival of indigenous forms of power. This hypothesis would again be *prima facie* consistent with the experiences of Uganda and Ghana, both of whom have been among the World Bank's best pupils over the last decade in terms of the extent of their state's disengagement from some economic and social activities, and have also witnessed substantial traditional resurgences. The Buganda kingdom, for example, is attempting to become a *bona fide* actor in development with ongoing education, water, sanitation, and agricultural projects (Englebert 2002), as are chiefs in Malawi, Niger and South Africa.

In a related argument, but embracing a more Montesquieu-like perspective, Liisa Laakso (1996) suggests that the spread of structural adjustment programs in Africa in the 1980s brought about a subordination of the state to capitalist rationality rather than to "a principle that is concomitant with the general spirit of the nation." Under SAPs, power appears increasingly remote to people. In this context of disempowerment, she argues, ethnic and regional identities get politicized. Generalizing her point to pre-colonial forms of *political* identity, one could hypothesize that the more disempowered a society is by its economic restructuring and the displacement of power it generates, the more likely it is to develop alternative modes of identity, including traditional ones. From this perspective, the resurgence of tradition would be one facet of an ongoing exercise in reconceptualization of the state by Africans. Buganda again, with its ideology of the rural state and its

ascription of blame to Western forms of modernization for Uganda's development problems, supports such a claim.[18] Demands for the restoration of the monarchy in Rwanda may follow a similar logic, as economic restructuring and foreign aid have contributed to the alienation of Rwandans from their political and economic system (Uvin 1998).

## External and Material Facilitating Factors

Traditional resurgence occasionally results from external attempts to reshape the African institutional landscape and from the availability of external resources. Over the last decade, foreign donors have put increased emphasis on grass-root processes, on the association of local "stakeholders" with development projects, decentralization and the promotion of NGOs as partners in development and conflict resolution. To some extent, traditional structures of authority have benefited from this trend since they appear to outside aid agencies as readily available local counterparts with a substantial measure of authority and capacity to mobilize. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that fostering the role of traditional authorities has been a common theme among recent donor-sponsored conferences on development and conflict resolution. In March 1995, for example, a conference on "Civil Society and National Reconciliation in Mali and Niger," in the wake of Tuareg unrest, proposed a program of reinforcement of traditional chiefs "towards the enhancement of their capacities in the prevention and management of sub-regional conflict."[19]A further "Workshop on Increasing the Capacities of Traditional Structures in the Prevention and Management of National and Sub-regional Conflict in West Africa" took place in November 1995 in Niger.[20] In 1997, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum held a conference in Gaborone on traditional leadership and local government (Ray 1997). The World Bank has also sponsored research on the possible development benefits of indigenous structures (see Dia 1996).

The availability of the legal status of NGO and the promotion of NGOs by aid donors have also combined to give traditional authority a new legal avenue for recognition and fund-raising. Buganda, for example, has set up two development NGOs, the Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation and the Kabaka Foundation, that raise funds internationally and are actively involved in project administration and management. Benin's Africa-Cultures International Institute, whose purposes include the promotion of traditional systems, also has the status of an NGO, a factor which may have contributed to the UN recognition of its 1999 World Conference of Kings, Queens, Traditional Chiefs and Religious Leaders on Conflict Prevention in the Twenty-First Century.

Patterns of globalization of information and resource flows may also contribute to the resurgence and the promotion of the status of traditional structures. The availability of the Internet has certainly raised the profile of several tradition-based groups and promoted their image and message beyond the states that encompass them. There are numerous World Wide Web sites dedicated to traditional African systems, including buganda.com, otumfuofund.org (Ashanti-sponsored), puntlandnet.com, and pulaaku.net ("home page of the Fulbe and Haalpular Nation"), to name just a few. Diasporas also combine with the relative ease of international financial transfers to make external resources available to resurgent systems. Both Buganda and Ashanti are actively involved in diasporic fundraising, for example.

To some extent, these two trends – foreign donors' pressures towards decentralization and the increased capacity of traditional groups to raise funds independently from the state – have combined to create a new set of material forces whose consequences may include the type of institutional change that traditional resurgence embodies. Hendrick Spruyt (1994) has argued that demographically-induced shifts in material forces in Western Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages led to new social alliances and, in turn, to new institutions such as city leagues, city states and nation states. The power of cities in post-colonial Africa has so far promoted the adoption of neo-patrimonial policies, which have allowed for the reproduction of the colonial state. One could argue that changes in the African material environment are now promoting or facilitating the rise of traditional institutions. Could structural adjustment programs, with their litany of state retrenchment and parastatal liquidations; the reallocation of foreign aid towards grass-root organizations and the informal sector; and the

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18    See The Cultural and Development Revolution: The Buganda Kingdom's Medium-Term Development Programme [1995-2000]. Http://www.buganda.com/buga5yr.htm.

19    See Synergies Africa. *Société Civile et Réconciliation Nationale au Mali et au Niger*. Ouagadougou, 27-29 March 1995. See www.unrisd.org.

20    Republic of Niger. "Workshop on Increasing the Capacities of Traditional Structures in the Prevention and Management of National and Sub-Regional Conflicts in West Africa." Niamey, 1995. See www.unrisd.org.

availability of diaspora funds for non-state organizations, all possibly conspire to create a "shift in material power" that would in turn contribute to defining "new rules of authority" (Spruyt) ? For sure, there is no sufficient evidence at this point to suggest that such a radical institutional change is taking place in Africa, and even the weakest states are quite successful at resisting institutional evolution. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the speculative nature of this discussion, the resurgence of African traditional systems displays elements of a revenge of feudalism over the territorial state.

### Traditional Resurgence and State Reconfiguration

This latter discussion brings about the question of how much of a reconfiguration of the African state the resurgence of tradition actually entails. By itself, the increased salience of indigenous structures need not imply any reconfiguration of the post-colonial state, and may even promote its reproduction. If the resurgence does not challenge the bifurcation of the post-colonial state (Mamdani 1996), that is, its unequal division of power between the "modern" and the "traditional" sectors, then it may simply mark a reinforcement of this duality. Houses of chiefs and similar bodies tend to be cases of bifurcation, at least when their jurisdiction is limited to customary fields such as land allocation, dispute settlements and ceremonial duties. When they are associated with governments it is most commonly through networks of patronage rather than through formal sharing of political functions, as suggested by van Rooveroy van Nieuwaal (1999). The Ashanti revival, for example, may best fit the paradigm of "reciprocal assimilation" of elites articulated by Bayart (1993).

In most African states, however, there appears to be only limited evidence of the growth of bifurcated traditional institutions. Rather, most of the evidence suggests some actual reconfiguration of the state, although it is everywhere either embryonic or marginal. These reconfigurations appear to take one of three courses. First, there are instances of actual incorporation of traditional structures as institutions or partners of the post-colonial state. In South Africa, where the apartheid regime had established the prototypical bifurcated system, Williams (2000) shows a pattern of genuine integration of traditional authority in the core organs of the state at the local level, including the ex-officio appointment of 20% of Regional Council seats to chiefs in the Kwazulu-Natal province. People's alleged difficulties in distinguishing between chiefs and elected councilors at the local level are also a sign of incorporation (Williams 2000:10). Kwazulu-Natal traditional leaders have been able to expand the field of their authority by redefining key concepts such as "community affairs," and Williams believes that we are witnessing a "mutually transforming process" between local state and chiefs. Other examples of genuine incorporation include the collaboration between the Cameroonian government and the Lamido of Rey Bouba (although, in this case, the incorporation reinforces the repressive capacity of the state), and the *sungusungu* self-defense groups in Tanzania with their policing functions.[21]

Second, civil society-based challenges to the state carry the potential to force a reconfiguration of the latter. It is common in the study of African politics to contrast the state with organizations of civil society defined as the public space and the associative life between the family and the state. These organizations, such as NGOs, cultural groups or churches, are then conceptualized not only as offering a public space independent from the state and freer, but also as constraining the latter, reigning it in and forcing its accountability, thereby affecting its policies and promoting democracy (Lewis 1992, Bratton 1994). Adopting a broad definition of civil society, which makes room for indigenous institutions (Kasfir 1998), one can conceive of traditional systems as elements of civil society if they engage and constrain the state in an attempt to shape societal outcomes. If one conceives of civil society as resistance, neutralization of the state and re-appropriation of power (Bayart 1986, Chabal 1994), then the resurgence of tradition may also be construed as a manifestation of civil society. This is clearly not the case in Uganda, South Africa or with the Lozi of Zambia, where resurgent systems display characteristics of state rather than societal organizations. In Buganda, furthermore, the kingdom is making increasingly explicit claims to sovereignty, which set it aside from conventional civil society organizations. Nevertheless, the civil society pressure group perspective may be helpful in making sense of several cases of resurgence, such as the independent associations of chiefs and kings in Benin and Niger. The action of some Zambian chiefs is also reminiscent of the democratizing role usually imparted to civil society. In April 2001, they rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed Frederic Chiluba to run for a third presidential term.[22]

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21    For additional examples, see Richard Sklar (1999b).

22    *The Post* (Lusaka), 25 April 2001.

Finally, the state may also be reconfigured by the disengagement of some groups from its formal sphere of authority. The cases of Somaliland's secession and Puntland's quasi-secession are extreme instances of this type of reconfiguration. Barotseland's renewed separatism also qualifies. The revival of Sharia law in Nigeria's northern states constitutes a similar attempt at weakening the power of the central government. Finally, attempts at reinstating a monarchical system in Rwanda, though they do not literally constitute a case of disengagement, represent a sufficiently radical case of systemic rupture to be considered a proposed reconfiguration of the Rwandan state.

In the end, although the episodes of resurgence are of varied nature and import, most seem to contribute to a true reconfiguration of the state. They do not usually trigger it, however, and appear to be mainly responses to other forces, such as changing political and economic contexts. But their reaction to these shifting grounds may well contribute to changing the nature of political authority in some African states.

## Conclusions

Africa has witnessed a rise in tradition-based political action since the beginning of the 1990s. Rather than a mere return to hypothetical pre-colonial forms in the wake of the weakening of the African state, this resurgence appears to be the opportunistic by-product of several other trends that have characterized this period, including democratization, economic crisis, and globalization. Despite this second-fiddle role, traditional revival still makes its own contribution to the reconfiguration of power in Africa, whether by its incorporation in, its challenge to, or its disengagement from the state.

The diversity of these ongoing experiments highlights the pitfalls that lie with any attempt to provide a broad assessment of their promise (or threat) for the future of African politics. Some authors, myself included, have called for further integration of African traditional systems into the post-colonial state as a means to improve governance, stability and development. Sklar (1999a) has argued that traditional systems can provide a dose of stability to African polities. Dia (1996) and Wunsch (2000) have contended that increased reliance on traditional systems for public governance will reduce transaction costs and facilitate collective action, if only because of the greater availability of "social capital" among

indigenous groups than within heterogeneous post-colonial societies. For my part (Englebert 2000), I have suggested that building upon traditional institutions would reduce the illegitimacy of the African state and, thereby, the need for unproductive neo-patrimonial policies.

My thoughts on the topic harbor somewhat greater doubt after this survey of ongoing experiments in traditional resurgence. For one, the view that traditional systems can contribute to public administration presumes a rare degree of effective existence of the former. In many cases, rather than existing *sui generis*, resurgent traditional institutions have become contingent structures with their salience dependent on the strategies of local elites vis-à-vis exogenous forces. These contingent processes could certainly be co-opted into formal institutions of governance or for national development efforts, but this would require a willingness to share power with relatively autonomous forces which contemporary African states still usually fall short of.

Second, although tradition has indeed retained a broadly legitimate appeal among African citizens, this legitimacy does not necessarily translate into the realm of modern politics or development. In Ghana, for example, a majority of Ashanti people in rural and urban areas believes that the state should have a more powerful role than the kingdom (Morrison 1983). In Buganda, while the kingdom has been very successful at mobilizing Baganda for symbolic events, such as the king's coronation and wedding, this has not so far translated into a capacity to mobilize for development projects.

Finally, in numerous cases, chiefly structures themselves do not appear interested in increasing their effective sovereignty, but seem intent instead on benefiting from greater patronage from the state. In South Africa, many of the chiefs' demands in the immediate post-apartheid era were deflected by their enlistment on the state's payroll after the 1996 constitution. In Malawi, when the senate, set up by the 1994 constitution and which was to include traditional chiefs, was abolished by constitutional amendment in January 2001, some traditional chiefs protested that this move would deprive them of "a lot of lavish privileges, including soft loans" from which other parliamentarians benefit.[23]

This is not to say that traditional institutions cannot once again become significant actors in African politics. In fact, despite the heterogeneity and the

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23    Pan-African News Agency, 24 January 2001.

ambiguities of their resurgence, several have shown their capacity to evolve, modernize and democratize over time, in ways that may increase their credibility as future partners in government. The incorporation of the *kgotla* village councils as a structure of post-colonial statehood in Botswana testifies to this, as did the election of the Buganda parliament – the *lukiiko* – by universal suffrage before its abolition in 1967 (a mode of selection that the current Kabaka has repeatedly promised to reinstate). And in contemporary South Africa, as communities have asked for younger and more educated leaders, councilors to traditional chiefs are increasingly elected by community members rather than appointed by chiefs (Williams 2000).

In the end, a mixed picture emerges for mixed government in Africa. The rise of tradition-based forms of political action is likely to continue as the African state remains in flux. Yet, their resurgence is not simply a return to the past, or a revival of dormant institutions waiting in the wings for history to catch up with them. Because of the complexity and the variance of the reconfiguration processes to which they belong, their propensity to become a building block for a more democratic and more developmental African state is hard to assess and will likely vary widely across the continent. There can be, therefore, no universal blueprint for building a new Africa on the restored ruins of an ancestral one. But there should be opportunities in the years ahead to bring the African state closer to Africans by promoting the integration and the democratization of the most credible resurgent indigenous systems.

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