

COMMENTS  
ON TIMO KALLINEN'S  
"I NOW GO TO CHURCH,  
I AM NOT UNDER THE CHIEF."  
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Traditional leaders and their role in current politics are hot topics in the analysis of contemporary African society. A recent book on the relations between state, traditional leaders and democracy in Africa (Buur and Kyed [eds] 2007) prophesies "a new dawn for traditional authorities", and shows that the category of traditional leadership—reinvented at times, at others subjugated, often featuring new functions—is a novel and vigorous player in the political game both locally, nationally and on the global developmental scene. The persistence of the term 'traditional leaders'—also applied to newly invented power-holders—conveys that the label carries particular weight in the rallying of popular local support. Very little attention has been given to where the appeal of traditional leaders has its root.

Timo Kallinen's paper, however, does just that. It highlights the basis of power of traditional leaders, using the example of Asante society in Ghana. He points out that political power in Asante was once intricately intertwined with religious power, and this is true for a majority of polities in Sub-Saharan Africa. There is, however, a persevering tradition of neglecting this reality which can be traced from early British anthropology down to political analysis of Africa in the present time.

The paper is important, for it demonstrates the gulf between a colonial 'modern' concept of political power and African ideas of power in societies into which colonialism was implanted. Through the Asante example Kallinen traces the conceptual metamorphosis in thinking about power that had to take place before an African understanding of politics was formed in a 'modern' mould.

Kallinen also alerts us to the fact that the modern way of thinking about power blindfolds us from the core aspects of what constituted power on the African continent before what someone has called "the short interlude of colonial intervention".

Kallinen embarks on a critique of Mamdani that makes sense; focussing on destructive colonial aspects, Mamdani engages in a romantization of the 'democratic' aspect of traditional rulership. Yet there was a strong authoritarian structure inherent in the pre-colonial political setup regardless of any councillor power and popular support that a leader needed.

Even if it is true that colonialism often reified or re-invented chiefly power, the most relevant feature of pre-colonial power-holding was that all players in the political field were enmeshed in a contest for using and appeasing powers of a spiritual kind. This kind of power constituted the core of political office and legitimacy. Such powers could be manifested through sacred kings in their relation to ancestors, rituals, emblems, holy sites or fetishes. There was a competition for access to such powers among power-seekers, both for personal gain (a political aspect) and for the safeguarding of the prosperity of the realm (a religious one). Colonial and missionary interventionists regularly demonised these strange and

ambivalent powers, and underestimated their society-regulating functions. They seem to be neglected also by analysts and development interventionists today.

Kallinen recognises this fundamental aspect of African political tradition in the case of the Asante pre-colonial chiefdoms. Building his argument on Louis Dumont's ideas about the differentiation of the political category as being part of the birth of the modern state, Kallinen traces how thinking about politics in Asante gradually changed to become formulated as consisting of a domain separate from religion, in accordance with a modern secular and individualistic world view.

He shows how missionaries and colonial administrators, by introducing new divisions of thinking, by separating the categories 'religious' and 'political', succeeded in redefining the relationship between the African 'native' and his ruler. In Kallinen's case the missionaries occupied centre stage. It is via their ideas of religion, as the individual's choice and separated from an allegiance to a political ruler, voiced through the *Asantehene's* Christianized subjects, that a change toward a new concept of rulers in secular terms was brought about.

According to Kallinen the early missionaries in Asante were not interested in challenging the existing and quite strong Asante state structures directly. They embarked upon salvaging 'individual souls' with the underlying agenda that 'civilisation' could only be instigated this way. In doing so they acted separately from the colonial state, which by this time also had adapted a new way of looking at religion; to be a matter of individual choice, and in which the state had no particular agenda.

Kallinen traces the semantics used when early missionaries attempted to separate religion from politics. By separating local customs defined as 'fetishism' from 'merely ceremonial' customs, they sought to separate, in detail, the religious sphere from the political and thus secularise the Asante chieftaincy. Fetish worship was to be condemned, purely ceremonial duties retained. This was, as Busia confirmed, an arbitrary division; "in Asante thought the office of the chief was not divisible into the secular and the sacred".

The distinction of the two, so is Kallinen's argument, placed a "right-bearing individual" at the centre of political society and challenged the traditional view of how the Asante polity was constituted. The Christian Asante of the early colonial period were now depicted increasingly as 'citizens' of their natal chiefdoms. In Kallinen's example from 1942 the scenario envisaged by early missionaries comes true. Christians in Asante petition the *Asantehene*, their paramount chief, about the observance of Thursday as a work-free day. They ask to be exempted from this tradition, drawing on the fact that their religion already stipulates Sunday as a day of rest, and arguing that commemoration of the Asante God Asase Yaa of harvest and famine with a work-free Thursday goes against their Christian conscience.

Through this new Christian consciousness among Asante subjects, individuals now are spoken of in a new way. They are now rather citizens than subjects because allegiance (to rulers) and conscience (of religion) are separated. Beliefs are referred to as a private matter. Ideas of society as a social contract, of citizens, and of representation, had come to stay in the way in which Asante see themselves. This process, says Kallinen, demanded a specific socio-political setting; the colonial state, which made rules about freedom of conscience and about religion and politics.

Clashes between a traditional form of authority and ideas of modern citizenship continue to resurface both in an Asante context and elsewhere in Africa. Some, but not all of this, can be understood from a distinctly political perspective, which is the stance of most analyses



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of current African politics, be they of the Bayartian kind, concentrating on the competition of local elites, or following Mamdani in focusing on the hybridisation of African political institutions and the division of them into traditional and modern. Kallinen's critique of both these perspectives is that they fail to take account of the historical basis of African political institutions, and I endorse him here. It is time to remove blinkers of the modern mindset if we are to understand in a deeper way the dimensions of contemporary African politics.

REFERENCES

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**Buur, Lars and Helene Maria Kyed** (eds) 2007. *State recognition and democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa: a new dawn for traditional authorities?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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