

**«You Europeans,  
you are just like Fish!»**

Some sceptical reflections on Modernity  
and Democratisation in Africa

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O autor deste artigo procede a um exame extremamente crítico de alguns dos pressupostos teóricos, frequentemente de natureza ideológica, da discussão científica e política em torno dos conceitos da «modernização», do «desenvolvimento» e da «democratização» em África. A sua conclusão é que a realidade africana só pode ser captada adequadamente por abordagens desembaraçadas de um conjunto de ideias feitas, e que só nesta base será possível conceber estratégias válidas.

The author of this article proposes an extremely examination of some of the theoretical assumptions frequently ideological in nature, underlying the scientific and political discussion around the concepts of «modernisation», «development», and «democratisation». His conclusion is that African reality can only be adequately understood by means of approaches freed from a number of current ideas, and that only on this basis will it be possible to define valid strategies.

L'auteur de cet article procède à un examen extrêmement critique de certains sous-entendus théoriques, fréquemment de nature idéologique, de la discussion scientifique et politiques autour des concepts de «modernisation», «développement» et «démocratisation». Sa conclusion est que la réalité africaine ne peut être comprise de façon adéquate qu'au moyen d'approches libérées d'un ensemble d'idées courantes, et que la définition de stratégies valables n'est possible que sur cette base-là.

**African** nationalism comprised two elements. One, largely negative, identified two enemies. The first was colonialism itself but this could be attacked using the very notions that Westernisation had already provided. The second was African traditions broadly conceived. As Nkrumah put it in 1961 the people had to be liberated «*from the bondage of foreign colonial rule and the tyranny of local feudalism*»<sup>1</sup>. Even if many African leaders shied away from such blunt statements, seeking solace perhaps in the alternatives, whether Pan Africanism or various symbolic reassertions of tradition, they did not substantially disagree. The pretty texts of African history and civilisation and the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism were the gilding not the substance. At best they buttressed some shaky mechanisms of psychological reassurance and provided for the reassertion of racial dignity. They certainly never provided any means of seriously thinking about politics. Beyond identification of the enemy African nationalism comprised deep resentment of «backwardness», understood largely in terms of wealth and power, allied with an equally strong conviction that the way to overcome that backwardness was to emulate the Western state as closely as possible, with all its attendant representational, bureaucratic and juridical modes insofar as these expedited modernisation. African nationalism was about the securing of power in already demarcated territories, the control and consolidation of already existing states and the (if necessary) ruthless subjection of heterogeneous societies to the processes of modernisation.

## The Promise of Modernisation

Thus the first generation of African leaders variously saw their task «*to combat prejudices, routine, inferiority complexes and the fatalistic spirit*»; to place themselves in step with «*evolutionary laws*»; to emancipate the «*spiritually and mentally bewitched*»; to «*goad [their societies] into the acceptance of the stimuli necessary to rapid economic development*»; to «*create a new mentality and way of seeing things*»<sup>2</sup>. However startling these texts may seem now they shared a common commitment to extremely ambitious programmes of social transformation, in which modernity is exemplified by science, progress, discipline, themselves all embodied in the form of the modern state. There are often (rather vague) acknowledgements of the need to adjust this to local realities, an acknowledgement which, sometimes, shades into some realism about the obsta-

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«You Europeans, you are just like Fish!», Anonymous Kaonde woman quoted in K. Crehan, *The Fractured Community Landscapes of Power and Gender in Rural Zambia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997 p. 87.

<sup>1</sup> K. Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, Pall Mall Press, 1964 pp. 158-9; Botswana Democratic Party, 1965 Election Manifesto clause 8; Sekou Toure, *Africa on the Move*, Panaf Books, 1977, p. 311; K. Nkrumah, *Africa must Unite*, London, Panaf Books, 1963, p. 105; Samora Machel, The People's Republic of Mozambique: The Struggle Continues, *Review of African Political Economy*, n.° 4, 1975, p. 20.

cles confronting a modernising project in Africa, and even, occasionally, some ambivalence about the relationship between Africa and modernity. But, despite this cautious note, what stands out is an almost magical wishing into being of modernity, a tendency which, to be fair, was by no means restricted to African elites but extended to their (then) friends in the West. Africanist scholarship was formally constituted as a legitimate endeavour within the academic division of labour during a period in which modernisation was the ruling idea. And if the state was the vehicle then nationalism (benign, curiously, in Africa malevolent everywhere else) was the fuel of modernisation. The newly independent African countries were to be transformed into modern, dynamic societies in which the combined forces of economic growth, urbanisation, education and the mass media would sustain new forms of associational life and create informed, participant citizens with both of these providing the essential props, at least eventually, of a liberal democratic political order.

The centrality of modernisation, the state and nationalism ensured that history and political science became prominent, indeed predominant, in the new African Studies, anthropology having become increasingly suspect as the handmaiden of colonialism or worse, as the purveyor of a patronising account of Africans, implying they were incapable of modernity. The new disciplines by contrast were heavily complicit in the modernising project, uncovering glorious historical pasts for modern African nation-states, praising African nationalism and its continuities with the pre-colonial «struggles for freedom», and vaunting the new political organisations that would lead African countries to the New Era. In sum these efforts were as much to do with ideological and political agendas in the West as they were to do with the discovery of «new facts» or the exercise of social «science».

## Modernisation Eclipsed?

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This particular bundle of concepts and understandings now seems a world away. The modernising project in all its variants has signally failed in Africa to effect the anticipated transformations. More than this the whole framework of categories clustered round modernisation, indeed the very idea of a transition from «tradition» to «modernity», appeared confounded by what was happening in independent Africa. Perhaps most poignantly «tribalism» or «ethnicity», far from dissolving in the face of progress, appeared to acquire increased virulence; indeed as African nationalism evaporated, to become the main currency of the new state politics, often in urban locations once thought to be the very engine rooms of modernity. It no longer seemed plausible to regard ethnicity as a cultural hangover or even a temporary compass in a rapidly modernising environment, but rather it appeared to be a veritable product of modernisation itself, driven by increasingly bitter struggles for power and

resources within the structures of the new states. The results of empirical enquiry were supported by theoretical interrogation and critique. This suggested that «tradition» came to be a sort of residual category that meant little more than the not-modern; the effect of that being that no real differences in traditions could be registered and the only change that this terminology could recognise was transition towards the Western experience; and finally that tradition and modernity represented mutually exclusive and functionally interdependent clusters of attributes so that urbanisation was naturally bundled with capitalism, democracy, secularisation and so on, an assumption that precluded various forms of mixture of the traditional and the modern. Beyond these descriptive and analytical points the categories of tradition and modernity came under fire on normative grounds. This was part of a much larger shift of Western sensibilities, particularly but by no means exclusively exemplified in academic discourse, which came to consider the attribution to «others» (or, more portentously, the «Other») of such notions as «tradition» as not only empirically and conceptually empty, but both morally offensive and complicit in, if not directly constitutive of, oppressive forms of social and political relations.

Such criticisms generated of course their own dilemmas well captured by Feierman – «If we define the people of a given society as different from us, then we have defined them as other, distant from us, not subject to the same historical forces or living in the same moral universe. This is unacceptable. But if we say that we are indeed coeval, living in the same era, subject to the same historical forces, struggling with the same issues, then we lose the picture of cultural variation which is the heart of anthropology»<sup>3</sup>. Attempts to resolve this difficulty have prompted, not only across the social sciences and humanities but in certain areas of policy debate especially about «development», widespread assertions of «agency» on behalf of social actors and insistent calls for (anti) «essentialism». The first connotes a repudiation of «victimhood» and a robust assertion of the social and cognitive capabilities of ordinary individuals. Anti-essentialism questions both the idea that identities are naturally given and that people can have integral and unproblematic identities. By extension such arguments «challenge accounts of collective identities as based on some 'essence' or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others»<sup>4</sup>. So in the field of African studies more generally such arguments have provided some of the intellectual resources to proclaim a new world of «creolisation» and «glocalisation»<sup>5</sup>. The old myth of a Merrie Africa of cultural authenticity and/or «backwardness» gives way to a post-modern Africa of endlessly ecstatic bricolage and multiple modernities<sup>6</sup>. Not the least of the benefits of such a view (at least for its proponents) is that the «historicity» of African societies is

<sup>3</sup> Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals Anthropology and History in Tanzania*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Ulf Hannerz, «The World in Creolisation», *Africa*, 57, 1987, pp. 546-59.

<sup>6</sup> A good recent example with copious references to appropriate literature is Charles Piot, *Remotely Global Village Modernity in West Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

restored and by (very strong) implication the standing of Africans as full members of (one) human family is re-asserted.

All of these shifts finally have had their impact on understandings of African politics. Old paradigms could now be dismissed as «*mere ideological preconceptions*» which have «*abysmally failed the test of plausibility*»<sup>7</sup>. «*Dependency is a fairy tale*» and development is a «*disastrous notion*»<sup>8</sup>. Modernisation theory can see only a failed state to be explained by «*tradition*», its explanatory framework allowing only a vacuous teleology or a facile exoticism. Dependency theory is no better, seeing African realities only as externally determined by global class forces. Both are «*analytic disasters*»<sup>9</sup>. But beyond such polemics several positions are posed. Firstly, it is argued that African politics should be understood by means of universal concepts, not treated, as Stephen Ellis puts it, in terms of «*otherness*»<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, it is suggested that political analysis is now informed by a great deal more knowledge and particularly historical knowledge. The frequent and passionate assertions of «*historicity*» register a claim to Africa being a part of history, as having a capacity to be understood in its own terms and not as a function of something else (say Western imperialism). This requires the «*de-exoticisation*» of tradition, involving a strategy of denying ethnicity as tradition and its re-understanding as a practice simultaneously asserting the capacity for action amongst subordinate as well as ruling groups. As a result it becomes possible to emphasise the continuities in African political life. Thirdly, and most importantly, it has led to the view that the modern African state is precisely that, a modern African state; it has, been grafted onto African societies. It is to its foundations and the associated political strategies that we should attend rather than such irrelevancies as the form of state or the ideological statements of leaders and so on.

## The Return of Modernisation

There is no doubt that this onslaught has had effects, bringing about dramatic changes in words and usages. No-one now dare talk of imparting «*civilisation*» or «*making men modern*»<sup>11</sup>. In academic and policy circles alike slogans abound calling for «*African solutions*» or «*African alternatives*». These shifts are not mere changes of tone or rhetoric, yet another threadbare mask to cover the ever sinister play of

<sup>7</sup> P. Chabal, *Power in Africa: An Essay in Political Interpretation*, London, Macmillan, 1992, p. 197 & p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> J-F Bayart, *The State in Africa*, Harlow, Longmans, 1993, p. 33 and in James Manor (ed), *Rethinking Third World Politics*, Harlow, Longmans, 1991, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Ellis, «*Democracy in Africa Achievements and Prospects*», in D. Rimmer (ed), *Action in Africa*, Oxford, James Currey, 1993, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alex Inkeles & David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern*, London, Heinemann, 1974 far more interesting now, like much of this literature, for its praise poems to modernity than its ponderous parade of scientificity.

Western interests. But their importance need not obscure the fact that, concurrent with them, the modernisation framework (and its dependency cousin), far from disappearing, has rather shifted its ground. The key to this remains the state. It was the state that was to open the door to progress and it is the state that is now seen to have failed. Although there are considerable differences in theoretical provenance and language a cluster of themes has emerged to constitute the new mainstream understanding. African states lack legitimacy because there is no real political representation or participation. To the extent that states are linked to the wider society it is through forms of clientelist politics. Clientelism breeds corruption and arbitrariness and the scope for all these is greatly increased by a large degree of state intervention in the economy. The form of politics that results is a ruthless struggle for power and resources by individuals and cliques and leads to the state's development policy being made against the interests of society as a whole. Over time African societies, or elements of them, have resisted these tendencies causing both politics and states to fail. And so debate has shifted to firstly, how to make the state work better and secondly, how to achieve by other means things that should have been achieved by the state. Simplifying somewhat, both of these are seen to point in the direction of the market and civil society because the former removes opportunities for rent-seeking and corruption and because accountability comes from the existence of independent power bases in society. Thus both together will constrain the possibilities of the abuse of office by state officials and both will make possible the emergence of a properly constituted public authority properly committed to the public interest.

Not surprisingly then on this shifted terrain the (new look) modernisation school suggest that things really are changing this time (or at least have the potential to do so) as vibrant civil societies and democratisation bring corrupt and tyrannical regimes to heel. Voluntary associations or non-governmental organisations have come to be seen as the key to strengthening African civil society. It is true that within this context much more attention is paid to «the indigenous» (and this is a particular fancy of Western NGOs) but this is to the degree that the indigenous suits or is conducive to the processes of modernisation. This emphasis on the indigenous also suits a kind of policy discourse as it suggests that while it is appropriate for «*the international community*» to intervene in the affairs of African states this is in order to assist the (good) domestic forces agitating for change against the (bad) old elites and preserves at least a (very threadbare) notion of sovereignty.

If modernisation theory has been reworked rather than buried it is not unlikely that some form of dependency theory continues to survive; and so it proves. This (new look) dependency school no longer places the same emphasis on structural economic variables (terms of trade, capital flows and the like) but rather on political strategies. But against the mainstream positions it suggests that, what it often calls a neo-liberal agenda does not promise a genuine modernisation because it is constructed to sanction only the enhancement of technocratic control over African soci-

eties within a globalising capitalist order. Despite a fig-leaf of commitment to democracy and empowerment the policies of structural adjustment have done great damage to those groups in African societies in the forefront of struggles for democracy, groups who are, in addition, often most vociferously opposed to structural adjustment and related policies<sup>12</sup>. It follows that what is really needed in Africa is a *genuine* civil society and *real* democratisation involving popular participation as the means to a rekindling of the nation-state building strategy. But ultimately in this view the political motivations of the masses are largely driven by economic welfare considerations; only once these are improved can their commitment to democracy be secured, essentially by outside forces.

The most notable feature of this reconfiguration of modernisation theory involves a shift in some time-honoured assumptions about democracy. The effective operation of this form of political order was long argued to involve certain structural pre-requisites, including a certain level of economic prosperity, a large middle-class, fairly high levels of education for the mass population and so on. Now the presumed causalities are reversed so that the lack of democracy (or at least an accountable state) becomes the root cause of the lack of development. While acknowledging this shift it is important to note that, in both its «mainstream» and «radical» variants, it is not a politicisation of modernisation theory (the political was always central) but rather a shift, from an emphasis on a modernising state to one on a modernising civil society; and that, while it may have important implications for policy and certain kinds of empirical research, in no sense does it part company with the dominant analytical and normative assumptions prevalent in Western liberal social and political theory.

## A Liberal Project

These considerations suggest that both the sheer resilience and the analytical ambiguities of «modernisation theory» are much more deeply rooted within Western social and political theory than is generally acknowledged. For some of course it may be sufficient to repeat the familiar criticisms of modernisation theory and leave it at that. For those not content with such a manoeuvre a question remains as to whether the notions of tradition and modernity are quite as bankrupt as they are now usually said to be. In approaching that issue it is sensible to acknowledge that there is little doubt that these terms have come to carry an insupportable weight subsuming transitions as varied as custom to law, communal to private property, barter to exchange, seasonal to clock time, craft to automated production and so on; and that

<sup>12</sup> See Adebayo Olukoshi, *The Elusive Prince of Denmark*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998, for this position and extensive references to the appropriate literature.



the idea that all these continua straightforwardly join in two contrasting bundles is the «error of seeing everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package»<sup>13</sup>.

But at their most intellectually serious the various conceptual schemes devised by European social theory were intended to distinguish forms of social order characterised by the presumption of the universality and equality of individual interests conjoined with a universal morality, all under the aegis of a universal reason; and forms of social order that were not. Modern societies would take the form of a differentiation of spheres of activity – the economic, the political, the familial, and so on to which different values and orientations, could be deemed appropriate. The values appropriate to one sphere could be positively dysfunctional in another. Various accounts provided more or less elaborate pictures of this form of social order, especially the problems of ensuring its coherence, but undergirding them all was a distinction between «private» and «public». The public sphere, comprising both the state proper and the market in its formal constitution and operation, embodied rationality and impersonality. As we have seen it is the failure of African societies, and especially states, to respect (and police) this boundary that forms the core of the contemporary mainstream explanation of African state and wider social failure.

But these boundaries (notably between public and private) are not firm and there has been and is always a tension between them<sup>14</sup>. The exact domains of the private and the public have always varied historically and can only be made sense of as part of the attempt to construct a liberal capitalist order. Liberal authors often comfortably suggest that, «we know directly of communities without markets, bound by unspoken obligations in which altruism and reciprocity appear to govern and in which cohesion is maintained without coercion. These are our families»<sup>15</sup>. There is an important sense in which this is right not least in acknowledging that such relationships certainly have existed, and perhaps still do, inside the heartlands of liberal capitalism and require no «othering» or «exoticising» of strange peoples. But such assertions are deeply misleading if they imply that private and public comfortably co-exist. It may be true that over long historical periods the (nuclear) family in various forms has been tolerated as an institution which more or less looks after itself and remains an appropriate place for the practical business of child-rearing and early moral socialisation. But this tolerance has been and is always under siege by more hostile stances towards the family, either insinuating it is nothing more than an *ersatz* contract or denouncing it as an «oppression», in whichever case insisting it is not what it says it is. It is these understandings that inform past and current efforts to subject the family to the logic of contract and

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, «Two Theories of Modernity», *Public Culture* 11(1), 1999, pp. 153-174, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Despite its apparent futility liberal political theory continues to search for general solutions to this problem. For a recent discussion see E. Charney, «Political Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere», *American Political Science Review* 92,1, 1998, pp. 97-110.

<sup>15</sup> William James Booth, *Households On the Moral Architecture of the Economy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 292.

«rights» both within the boundaries of states, and increasingly, across them<sup>16</sup>. The endless difficulties that liberal thought and practise have had with the family gives the clue to their response to communities larger than families – either they do not «really» exist at all (they are just illusions at best fantasies at worst «oppressions»), or perhaps more generously, culture is really «epiphenomenal» an accompaniment to social activities whose real centre of gravity lies elsewhere; or if communities and cultures do exist, they may be of the «wrong» kind. The «*enthusiasm for writing out of human history every instance of authentic and autonomous 'Others'*» is not, *pace* Professor Lee, an aberration of a few scholars, but a deep-seated constant of Western discourse and practice<sup>17</sup>.

Such considerations may enable us to identify the rational kernel of modernisation theory. What marks non-modernised communities and cultures is extensive interaction on all dimensions of social life within the boundaries of those communities, the relative impermeability of the boundaries, at least where that would threaten the integrity of the group and the self-sufficiency of the culture's own moral and normative standards; that is to say that the main source of moral and normative standards is from within the culture. None of this precludes «borrowings» (and the empirical evidence for this is of course undeniable) provided that these do not overwhelm the boundaries of the culture (and of course many cultures and communities have ceased to exist). What makes modernisation different is that it means the dis-embedding of people from their cultures and communities in the form of individual emancipation; it can therefore be understood as «*the increase of individualism and individuality*»<sup>18</sup>. But it is also about re-embedding individuals in new forms of social groups which, even if they are not wholly reduced to the impersonality of the state and the market, come to substantially depend on those forms of social order.

Such considerations also throw some light on the question of the state. The endless ambiguities about the state, accountable but not captured, autonomous but not oppressive, neutral but interventionist, are thus rooted in the deeper ambiguities of the private/public distinction and can only be made sense of as a project. In this context the liberal state must be both weak and strong. Weak because, on the one hand, the state is purely an enabler, little more than a neutral mechanism providing the security to allow free, equal individuals to pursue their life projects, unhindered by others. In this understanding a strong state is a potential threat to free persons. Firstly the state may attempt to impose some particular social order, embodying some set of values, that constrains peoples' freedom and secondly, that the offices of the state

<sup>16</sup> The promoters of such agendas are often helpfully frank about shifts in the notion of public/private. Cf. Geraldine van Bueren, *The International Law on the Rights of the Child*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1995, ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Lee, «The Primitive as Problematic», *Anthropology Today*, 9(6), 1993, pp. 1-3, p. 2. This (often) irritable oscillation between accepting that communities and cultures exist and trying to argue they are essentially ephemeral characterises liberal writing as early as John Locke. Cf. his remarks on pigtales in D. Wootton (ed), *John Locke, Political Writings*, Penguin, 1993, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity*, Routledge, 1994, p. 6.

may be abused by their incumbents (and the stronger the state the greater the possible abuses). The way to counter these threats is to institutionalise some form of accountability and historically, as a general tendency, this has taken the form of firstly, of a universal legal code to which state officials are also subject, and secondly a complex of institutions now generally referred to as liberal democracy and comprising universal suffrage, political parties, rights of political participation and so on.

But this is only half the story. The other half is a series of arguments that require that the state be strong. This strong state must to a certain extent be disengaged from social interests and certainly not be overwhelmed by them. It must be capable of imposing and maintaining a certain kind of social order, essentially a liberal capitalist order. Far from being merely accountable to social interests it must be capable of ensuring that only the right kind of interests are in play; indeed in terms of the European experience it is not implausible to suggest that the state itself is committed to the constitution of social classes as a new form of social order<sup>19</sup>. In this half of the story it is quite impossible for the liberal state to be neutral and indifferent to values; rather it must actively interfere in what people believe and how they live, even to the extent of inculcating certain kinds of values and dispositions. Such elaborate processes of transformation of both «structures» and «values» require not a minimalist state, but a state constituted in the form of an immense bureaucratic apparatus with all the capacity for fine-grained social surveillance and social control which that makes possible.

## The Liberal Project in Africa

Constructing such a state and putting it to use is perhaps the greatest political drama of modernity and difficult enough in its heartlands. Neither was likely to be any easier in Africa – as Cahen puts it, counterposing Third Republic France with contemporary Mozambique, «*things do not go anywhere near as smoothly in the capitalist periphery, where the authoritarian modernising state is not a source of upward mobility. Its policies are in these conditions a stick with no corresponding carrot. Its political identity is experienced as alien by its peoples, who thus develop defensive, centrifugal, anti-state identities in response*»<sup>20</sup>. It certainly could be argued that African elites have not been as adept as they might have been. In retrospect both the sheer fragility of African «nationalism» in the absence of the colonial master, and the formidable difficulty, in the face of bewildering diversity, of providing it with any cultural content, have become clear. Even its development content has been excessively aspirational, often

<sup>19</sup> See G. Burchell et al. (eds), *The Foucault Effect*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, esp. ch.1.

<sup>20</sup> M. Cahen, Nationalism and Ethnicities: Lessons from Mozambique at [www.dundee.ac.uk/cphrc/sections/articles/cahen1.htm](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/cphrc/sections/articles/cahen1.htm), p. 15.

quite unrealistic, and more often than not seemingly innocent of the processes and instruments of social change in the West (and indeed in the East) the effects of which it sought to emulate<sup>21</sup>. Of these the most important, yet again, was the state. The mesmeric effect of the modern state on African elites had never been in doubt but an understanding of the real sinews of the Western state which lie, not so much in a rather threadbare rhetoric of «mobilisation», but in endlessly painstaking processes of individuation, homogenisation, surveillance and discipline, this perhaps eluded them. Nkrumah spoke for many when he demanded social change «like jet propulsion» but the harsh judgement must be that African elites understood as little of the former as they did of the latter<sup>22</sup>.

Thus there is little disagreement that the states constructed by African elites are weak, poorly focused, and their writ rarely runs through the «political kingdom». The Central African Republic is doubtless an extreme case in which «*the state stops at PK 12*» (i.e. twelve kilometres from the capital)<sup>23</sup>. But generally speaking Herbst is probably right to assert that, «*no large African country can be said to have consolidated control over its entire territory*»<sup>24</sup>. There can surely be little doubt either that, to a considerable degree, «national» and «local» politics remain poles apart. Political scientists may ritually protest that they are «*not attempting to resuscitate the tradition versus modern dichotomy*», but the substitution of a focus on the «*cultural logic of African politics*» but not in a narrowly culturalist way, suggests that the dreaded dichotomy is not so easily escaped<sup>25</sup>. Redefined along the lines suggested here it is hardly surprising indeed that political science constantly uncovers distinct «logics», suggesting that for example, «*State law and local normative orders constitute different logics*» or that «*In law, official functioning and budget it [the state] is totally Western. In practice it is otherwise traversed by logics in drastic contradiction with the original model*»<sup>26</sup>.

But there is another side to the story of that unthinkable bad thing the weak state, namely, that many African peoples and communities retain a coherence and a capacity for action that people elsewhere in the world (though notably in the West) have long lost. Thus the Senegalese Family Code which is (needless to say) in line with «international standards» but not (of course) African ones, hardly regulates Senegalese families, despite being the product of years of work and passed in the

<sup>21</sup> The Mozambican government put forward a plan in 1980 to industrialise the country in 10 years. See M.Hall and T. Young, *Confronting Leviathan*, Hurst and Co., 1997. See also John Saul, *Millennial Africa*, Trenton, NJ., Africa World Press, Inc., 2001, ch. 4.

<sup>22</sup> K. Nkrumah, *Autobiography*, Nelson, 1957, p.x.

<sup>23</sup> A popular saying quoted in T. Bierschenk & Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, «Local Powers and a Distant State in rural Central African Republic», *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35(3), 1997, pp. 441-468, p. 441.

<sup>24</sup> J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*, p. 254.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce J. Berman, Ethnicity, «Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism», *African Affairs*, 97, 1998, pp. 305-341, p. 340 & p. 308 my emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sten Hagberg, *Between Peace and Justice Dispute Settlement between Karaboro Agriculturalists and Fulbe Agro-pastoralists in Burkina Faso*, Uppsala, Uppsala University, 1998, p. 231. Olivier de Sardan, «A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa», *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37(1), March 1999, pp. 25-52. p. 47. There seems to be a similar use of «logic» in A. Mbembe, «Provisional Notes on the Postcolony», *Africa*, 62(1), 1992, pp. 3-37.

teeth of opposition from the marabouts, usually regarded as an essential pillar of the Senegalese state. This is doubtless in part because of the lack of capacity of the Senegalese state to enforce it and indeed many other laws. But it is also because the laws do not fit local communities and cultures who still have alternative traditions and therefore other options<sup>27</sup>.

Similarly in many African countries, land laws, which are often not merely in line with «international standards» but taken over lock, stock and barrel from the colonial powers remain unenforced, land registers are not maintained and indeed local officials do not know what the laws are. None of this suggests particularly efficient or competent states or, at the least, it suggests proliferations of competing jurisdictions and accompanying «brokering» of access to such jurisdictions<sup>28</sup>. But even today «most land tenure systems are 'communal' in character» and «groups often restrict alienation of land to outsiders, and thus seek to maintain the identity, coherence and livelihood security of the group and its members»<sup>29</sup>. Generalising this it might be argued that (many) Africans have not yet been disembedded from land both as a means of security but also of prestige and social and cultural value. They are practical Marxists and they know that to lose one's means of production is to become dependent on (unknown) others; better than Marx they know that to lose one's material means of production is to lose one's cultural means of production.

## Democracy and Democratisation

Colonialism is long gone and cannot be revived<sup>30</sup>; the modern African state, that is the elite-driven, modernising-from-above version, is widely agreed to have failed; the urge to modernise remains. While neither the agencies involved nor their alliances are without historical precedent the end of the Cold War has allowed a new triumvirate of Western states, the international organisations they control, and a motley alliance of NGOs that largely do their bidding, to put together a new architecture of interference compounded of direct interventions, frameworks of conditionalities, and projects to effect long-term social change. The most significant novelty of these arrangements is the lynch-pin position of international organisations like the World

<sup>27</sup> For the details see Leonardo Villalón, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 chs.3 & 6.

<sup>28</sup> For an example see Christian Lund, «A Question of Honour: Property Disputes and Brokerage in Burkina Faso», *Africa* 69(4), 1999, pp. 575-594.

<sup>29</sup> Camilla Toulmin & Julian Quan (eds), *Evolving land rights, policy and tenure in Africa*, International Institute for Environment and Development, 2000, p. 152. For further discussion see the very useful chapter by Christian Lund in Tor A. Benjaminsen and Christian Lund (eds), *Politics, Property and Production in the West African Sahel*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2001. His arguments do not I think invalidate the point I want to make. He would doubtless disagree.

<sup>30</sup> Understandably on my account certain rather conservative liberals retain some nostalgia for it.

Bank which clearly illustrates many of the arguments that have been put forward so far. Over some twenty years in which its actions in Africa have become more and more obtrusive, it is clear that there has been a twin track attempt both to weaken states (in certain sorts of ways) and to strengthen them (in other sorts of ways). While this strategy has been shaped by many contingencies, the international political situation and the policy shifts of Western states and elites being only the most obvious, the trajectory of the Bank, exemplifies how this project has expanded and diversified from a narrow focus on economic growth to a concern with structures of governance, to programmes of social reconstruction which in their scale and aspirations (if not yet the political will and the resources committed to them) are paralleled only by nineteenth century colonialism and the post-war occupations of Germany and Japan. In so doing the Bank has begun to analyse, comment on and intervene in virtually every facet of the social organisation of African (and some other) states. In no sense can it be plausibly (any longer) be described as a bank or even a development agency.

It is within this context that the current processes of democratisation in Africa, at least as that term is understood by its external promoters, can be located. A recent collection of studies suggests that, «*elite democracy... has been foisted upon reluctant non-elective dictatorships by economically dominant classes who have been excluded from state power: professionals and middle classes, international donors and financial institutions*»<sup>31</sup>. There is, as already suggested, a presentational dimension here. The old ideas of democracy as requiring preconditions implies embarrassing hierarchies; the new stress on the universality and availability of democracy has a pleasantly egalitarian ring in a supposedly globalising world. But this is a relatively superficial feature (and in any case the old judgements rapidly return via such notions as the «consolidation» of democracy and the «quality» of civil society). But the change is more than presentational and forms part of a strategy of civil society-driven modernisation<sup>32</sup>. The efforts to reform the African state from above are by no means abandoned but they are thought to need a complementary drive from below. Electoral politics opens up the possibilities of discrediting and removing existing incumbents and putting new kinds of new kinds of modernising coalitions that will operate within the new frameworks designed by the West. Yet it is widely agreed that such electoral processes require institutionalisation both amongst the political elite and the wider society. At their most ambitious the strategies of Western states and their agencies involve the construction of societies of interests – the «right sort» of civil society will call forth the «right sort» of state. Yet electoral politics also opens up the possibility that people may make the «wrong» choices; not surprisingly, «*Madeleine Albright, when visiting Kano recently, was taken aback when thanked (albeit ironically) for introducing shari'a: 'but it's due to democracy', she was told*»<sup>33</sup>. Thus the democracy on offer must then be care-

<sup>31</sup> M. Cowen & L. Laakso (eds), *Multi-party elections in Africa*, Oxford, James Currey, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Julie Hearn has done interesting research on this. See Julie Hearn, *Foreign Aid, Democratisation and Civil Society in Africa: A Study of South Africa, Ghana and Uganda*, IDS Discussion Paper 368. March 1999.

fully hemmed in by external constraints, covert and overt, and domestically contrived by the «right kind» of local promoters and allies. The historical continuities here are truly remarkable. The dream of «*the advancement of the native populations to a higher state of civilisation*» lives on<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Murray Last, *Notes on the Implementation of Shari'a in northern Nigeria*, p. 6 unpublished paper. There is a French text in *Politique Africaine*, 79, 2000, pp. 141-152.

<sup>34</sup> Governor General Roume speaking in 1905, quoted in A. Conklin, «Colonialism and Human Rights A Contradiction in Terms? The case of France and West Africa 1895-1914», *American Historical Review*, 103(2), 1998, pp. 419-442 quote at p. 424.