



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Workshop

African Political Systems Revisited

September 10th-11th 2015

Organisers: Günther Schlee (MPI for Social Anthropology) and Aleksandar Bošković (University of Belgrade)

Venue: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Halle/S., Germany

OUTLINE

The main aim of the workshop is to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the publication of the book *African Political Systems*. This volume inaugurated the study of political systems of non-Western peoples, and, in retrospect, it also served as the landmark in establishing what later became known as political anthropology.

We propose to examine the directions in which the study of “African political systems” shifted in the meantime, from the changes in understanding of “segmentary lineage systems” (and the whole idea of the “clan-based societies”) to the important reconsiderations of the very terms like the “political structure” or “political system” in the contemporary world. Recent developments in Eastern Africa also challenge some of the earlier anthropological assumptions when it comes to issues of ethnicity and conflict resolution. A number of new questions arise: What is the value of traditional political institutions when dealing with contemporary issues? What is the role of mechanisms like mediation in the context of new political systems? Or how can the emerging societies and states be classified? Perhaps one could even talk about the “clan-based states”. We propose to look at the directions in which anthropological theory has moved, with the emphasis on concepts like the “early state” and its practical implications. In the arena of international relations during the last half century, some of the African political leaders (like the former presidents of Egypt and Ghana) were extremely influential in the global political movements, such as the “Non-Aligned Countries’ Movement”. Furthermore, with the end of colonialism, and the dissolution of political systems like *apartheid*, the world also witnessed the emergence of independent African states, some of which serve as major players on the international stage (e.g. Nigeria or South Africa). Sometimes, the emergence of “new states” can question our fundamental concepts of what constitutes a state – for example, in the case of Somaliland.

Apart from new forms of statehood and relationships between states and forms of organisation thought to be non-state, there may be new perspectives on old developments. Since the publication of *African Political Systems*, historiography and archaeology have advanced greatly, and examples of “early states” in ancient history may deserve to be reconsidered.

Therefore, this anniversary serves as an opportunity to revisit some of the major anthropological themes and see how they have developed in the previous decades. And, more importantly, we explore which directions the study of political systems may take in the immediate future.

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