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Review Article

Pre-colonial Africa and traditional social evolutionary theories of state formation and civilization

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ABSTRACT

One of the most frequently repeated claims in the social history literature is that good government and democracy were radical Western departures from traditional forms of premodern governance mired in autocracy. The prevailing Western theory of human social evolution has been one source validating this kind of Eurocentric and progressivistic thinking. Yet, recent empirical investigations and a turn to new theoretical frameworks challenge the prevailing social evolutionary theory. Data on pre-Colonial state formation in sub-Saharan Africa, that had been largely ignored or misinterpreted by social evolutionists, has been one stimulating source for this rethinking. Good government, thought to be the essence of contemporary democracy, has been understood as a recent contribution of the Western world to humanity (as Charles Tilly expressed it (1975: 608), democracy "moved from the West to the rest of the world"). Western theories of human social evolution have validated this Eurocentric and progressivistic thinking, based on the assumption that premodern states remained mired in autocracy until the advent of Western-inspired political enlightenment. I describe recent challenges to progressivistic social evolutionary theory, but my main objective is to argue that data from pre-Colonial sub-Saharan African state formation, that had been relegated to a "primitive" and unimportant stage of social evolution, has been and will continue to be a valuable source for new theory.

Key words: Social, Culture, Change, Sociology, Tradition, Founding fathers

INTRODUCTION

Mid-and late-twentieth century social evolutionary theorists ("neoevolutionists"), such as Elman Service (1975), theorized about how small-scale and highly egalitarian societies of the Neolithic were transformed into larger and more complex societies governed by powerful chiefs or rulers. In their top-down scheme of political transformation, the question of how some individuals or factions gained power over a subaltern was key, but they noted two distinct contexts for the centralized accumulation of power, "primary" and "primitive" (or "secondary"). In their view, the primary (or "pristine") archaic civilizations, Mesoamerican, Central Andean, Chinese, Indus Valley, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian, represented early pathways to eventual political modernity. In these regions, causal forces internal to society and local environment were the foundations of endogenous social change. These included, variously, the abilities to organize a vast redistributive (centralized) economy, to build and manage large-scale irrigation systems, and to control valuable agronomic resources under

conditions of population pressure. Their theory also assumed that emergent despotic elite easily subordinated a poorly organized subaltern class who were mystified by elite ideologies such as sacred kingship. The "primitive" context saw the evolution of what neoevolutionists termed "secondary" chiefdoms and states, in which they included sub-Saharan Africa. Primitive, from the neoevolutionist's vantage, implied the absence of the endogenous social change forces found in the archaic civilizations. Instead, the forces bringing social change were imposed from outside by more complex and highly evolved civilizations. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, influences they posited were those emanating from the Nile Valley or from Islamic and European sources. External influences included the intrusive conquest of passive settled agricultural populations by militaristic nomadic pastoralists, but also included entanglements with interregional and global exchange systems. The decline of neoevolutionist theory and the turn to new directions world-wide, archaeological and historical research carried out during the latter half of the twentieth century and into this century has led us to question the efficacy of the proposed causal factors underlying the growth of the archaic civilizations while at the same time demonstrating that interregional exchange systems must be figured into theories of social change whether "primary" or "secondary" (e.g., Blanton

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et al. in press). Recent critics of neoevolutionist theory have also questioned the assumed passivity of subalterns in processes of past social change. These findings not only challenge traditional causal theories, they also blur the proclaimed differences between archaic civilizations and the so-called secondary states.

MARETRIALS AND METHODS

The rethinking has convinced researchers, among them Africanists to investigate the possible utility of alternative theories. As part of this movement, I, along with my coauthors and other researchers, have questioned the assumption that powerful governing elites would necessarily have provided the principal engine of past political change (Blanton 1978). My turn away from traditional theories was influenced by cooperation theorists, most importantly Margaret Levi's Of Rule and Revenue (1988) [1]. Her work convinced me to consider the possibility that polity-building, even in premodernity, and outside the sphere of Western history, might in some cases have involved cooperation between social sectors rather than dominance by an elite few. To date, this new a research direction has shown considerable promise [2]. A cooperation approach to political transformation starts with the question: How is it possible to increase the proportion of persons in a society willing to cooperate, for example, by paying taxes, given that some, including the governing elite, will see little value for themselves in cooperative actions? The key, in the case of state formation, is the construction of institutions that build and sustain a social bond between the leadership and a broadly conceived group of taxpayers [3]. In this context, leaders and their factions will be successful to the degree that they provide the elements of good government in the sense of Rothstein (2011) [4]. This includes recognizing limits to their own authority while building and fiscally supporting the governing capacity required to monitor and punish malfeasance among their administrative agents and to equitably allocate tax burdens and benefits, such as public goods, across society. Taxpayers, on their part, are assumed to be rational social actors who agree to cooperate if they have confidence that governing institutions are effective, if they perceive that most other taxpayers are carrying their fair share, and if asocial actions counter to group benefit, among both the governing elite and taxpayers, can be identified and punished My dissatisfaction with neoevolutionism and eventual turn to collective action theory began while I was a graduate student. Although my main research focus has been on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, from the beginning I was fascinated by the literature on pre-colonial sub-saharan African chiefdoms and states. I felt an imperative to familiarize myself with this abundant literature because it is, in my estimation; the world's richest on this subject-matter [5-13]. My efforts in this regard eventually proved transformative for my thinking about the growth and decline of past polities because sub-Saharan African state-building often did not align with neoevolutionist claims. This reality was entirely ignored by them even though much of the basic research on Africa I drew from was published long before the peak of neoevolutionist influence during the middle and latter twentieth century. I especially took note of sources such as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940:112-12), Beattie (1967), and Lloyd (1965) who pointed to a persistent African pattern in which there was a recognition of mutual obligations between rulers and ruled, and that the "political elite represent, to a greater or lesser degree, the interests of the mass of the people" These insights point to political systems that have more in

common with contemporary democracies than with the perceived despotic polities of the premodern past [14].

How Different was pre-Colonial sub-Saharan Africa?

To evaluate collective action theory as it might apply to premodern contexts (that is, not influenced by concepts of Western democracy), I, with Lane Fargher, conducted a comparative cross-cultural analysis of 30 states from a global sample [15]. To evaluate the degree of collective action policies and practices, we coded for twenty-one variable measures of public goods, bureaucratization (the degree to which bureaucratic procedures were consistent with predictions of collective action theory), and the degree of control over governing principals (we also coded for fiscal economy and other variables not discussed in detail here) [16]. The results of the comparative study of premodern state formation have been highly revealing in a number of respects, including the finding of a notable degree of collective action in the pre-Colonial African sample (which included 10 cases) that challenges the idea of African "primitivity." Of the 30-society sample, the group with scores in the bottom one-third of the summed governing measures, that is, with the least evidence of collective action and good government, included four African societies along with three from Southeast Asia (Aceh, Perak, Bali), fourteenth-century England, and Tokugawa Japan. Three other African societies scored very close to the numerical mean of the 30-society sample while two African societies, Asante and Lozi, scored in the upper one-third, alongside Mughal, Aztec, Roman High Empire, Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, Renaissance Venice, and Classical Athens. In line with the findings of Evans-Pritchard, Beattie, Lloyd, and others, these two African cases scored exceptionally high on stated moral expectations for the principal leadership and on the degree of institutional constraints imposed on their actions, especially Asante and Lozi, but this was true also for Swahili Lamu [17]. In fact, the scores for these three are similar to those of Classical Athens and Renaissance Venice in this regard. The other non-African societies in the highest-scoring group showed considerable evidence for bureaucratization and public goods, but their monarchical systems resulted in scores lower than the African cases (or Athens and Venice) on controls exercised over governing principals [18].

Rethinking the Secondary State

Those African societies were secondary social formations with origins owing primarily to the intrusive forces of external conquest and trade needs to be revisited in some important respects [19]. It is true that the African societies were shaped to varying degrees by outside forces, but research has shown that what we call "macroregional" phenomena are more of crosscultural and cross-historical constant than an African peculiarity [20]. As elsewhere where we see the evolution of chiefdoms and states, the picture in Africa is not simple, but I suggest it reveals a pattern that is of considerable theoretical and practical political science interest [21]. First, it is important to note that the degree of external influence was highly variable [6]. While the Swahili coast and Banyoro/Bakitara kingdoms, among others, were deeply invested in an external commercial economy, albeit with extremely different social outcomes, other pre-colonial African societies in our sample remained relatively apart from external influences during the pre-colonial period, and this group included some that scored higher on measures of collective action, and good government including Yoruba, Buganda, and Lozi [7]. In some of the African societies we studied, external commercial

interactions did have authoritarian outcomes, for example Dahomey in the context of the Atlantic trade. This kind of external causal process evidently was also at play in the rise of the Banyoro/Bakitara kingdom (one of the coded societies). However, the period for which we had codable information (19th century) had been preceded by a relatively egalitarian phase of state-building that began around 1500 C.E. (known primarily from archaeological research) [8]. Yet, by the nineteenth century a royal monopoly had been imposed over the growing slave and ivory export economies. The monopoly became a source of funds to support a highly autocratic system with few or no public goods or economic or other controls exercised over kings [9]. Further, the resulting social system was highly stratified, with the Bahuma pastoralists and the ruling nobility dominating the much poorer Baheru cultivators, the latter referred to by Roscoe (1923: 4) as serfs [10].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

However, external entanglements in macroregional and global economic circuits did not have autocratic outcomes in all cases, for example, among the Swahili coastal polities (Swahili Lamu was chosen for detailed coding in the comparative sample) [11]. This region of East Africa was strongly influenced by macroregional and global commerce, and Lamu was one of the port towns mediating the interior African-Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade. Unlike the Banyoro/Bakitara kingdom, however, the stresses posed by growing wealth and ethnic diversity were moderated by the construction of institutions that allowed for political participation across social sectors, that distributed political power, and that prevented civic leaders from benefitting economically during their terms of office [12]. Lamu's central political institutions consisted of two governing councils, each representing major kinds of stakeholders. Council members were elected from the general population, and the two council leaderships held the polity's central authority, that was rotated between the councils every four years [13].

Asante also illustrates the highly variant outcomes of external commercial involvement. Although its population was involved in the pan-African and European commerce, the wealth those generated did not underpin the growth of autocracy. While commercial success by citizens was highly regarded and was considered crucial to the success of the polity (the state at times even provided seed money to budding entrepreneurs), at the same time the state gained an important source of revenues from a substantial inheritance tax on wealthy entrepreneurial households (McCaskie 1995:47-9). At the same time, an institutionally complex system of governance provided assurance that the leadership and its bureaucracy can be responsive to commoner needs in a way that would transcend the limitations inherent in government by a hereditary aristocracy. The key features of this system included: rulers governed in concert with higher and lower councils and could be rebuked for amoral action rulers could be impeached (ibid:81-2)(one was impeached for taking treasury funds for personal use [Wilks 1975: 470-1]), and if impeached they were held accountable after leaving office officeholding could not be a path to personal wealth or political advantage because private gain was prohibited for officeholders and rulers had no personal control of or access to state revenues: 479-81) [22-29]. Additionally, the Asante system did not result in a highly stratified society. Although slaves constituted an important source of population growth, rather than bringing a caste-like system of free and unfree, slaves had considerable

potential for upward social mobility and typically would become free members of society [30,31].

CONCLUSION

Africa Should Have Been a Source of Social Evolutionary Theory, but Primitivist Bias Precluded that what is most astounding to me is that Western social evolutionary theorists were so committed to their primitivist view of Africa they failed to appreciate its diverse political forms and to realize the potential this diversity represents as a source for new theorybuilding regarding political transformations. For example, from the vantage of a collective action theorist, I find it fascinating but not well understood that some of the pre-Colonial African polities were deeply involved in macroregional and global exchange networks, yet productively managed the influx of wealth by using it in part to fund responsive and legible systems of government. They also devised institutions to inhibit the potential for official corruption and to foster economic and social egalitarianism. The highly variant ways that polities address problems that ensue from an influx of wealth deserves research attention even to this day. We know that autocracy may result when institutional weakness gives a ruling elite discretionary control over resources (the "resource curse" including from petroleum and mineral exports, as described by Jensen and Wantchekon (2004) for contemporary African states.

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