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0521368936 - Contemporary West African States

Edited by Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, John Dunn and Richard Rathbone

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Introduction

DONAL B. CRUISE O'BRIEN AND RICHARD RATHBONE

The imperfections and limitations of West African states have been much remarked by outside observers over the period of close on three decades since independence, while another topic, that of the very survival of the state, has slowly emerged. It should of course be admitted that the critical comments of journalists or academics on the subjects of official corruption, poor governmental performance, the prevalence of unregulated social conflict or institutional decay are in broad terms often justified. But such critical commentary is properly to be set against the important fact that these states without exception have maintained themselves in being. The states of West Africa have, for example, escaped the more drastic forms of political disintegration apparent in Uganda or Sudan, in Zaire or in Mozambique.

In the process of surviving, the West African states may have more or less subtly altered in character as their rulers and citizens have modified their political expectations, discarding the innocent hopes of the early years of independence, but the state as political unit appears to rest on a significant measure of popular acceptance. The state has in general scarcely been challenged with any resolution, in principle a surprising fact in the case of such an allegedly artificial political entity, the creation of European colonial rule. The case of Biafra remains the outstanding exception in this regard, for outside of Nigeria it is the absence of concerted challenge to the state which is remarkable. We would infer from this absence of challenge a (perhaps provisional) popular acceptance of the state, latent if you will, but an acceptance which has its unarticulated logic: this is, that the discernible future possibilities, in the absence of the state, are very much worse than the flawed reality of the present.

Looking into the political future in the event of a collapse of the post-colonial state, the outside observer may consider the consequences of a possible reconstitution of traditional political entities – the Asante confederacy perhaps, or the Sokoto caliphate. Such reconstitutions could only be achieved at the price of a more or less prolonged period of war. From such a period of warfare, furthermore, there would be no certain victors: the short-run certainty would be of institutional fragmentation and social conflict, haunted by Hobbes' nightmare vision of the war of all against all.

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The present post-colonial peace has in general rested on the notion of a religiously neutral or secular state, this compromise being increasingly threatened by Islamic militancy in many West African states; and on the ascendancy of European languages as languages of state, this compromise being as yet little challenged by the advocates of African languages (which languages to recognise?). The post-colonial peace may be worth preserving in the form of these communal compromises, at least pending the emergence of viable political alternatives.

The states examined in this volume have a less and less valid claim to the label 'new states'. The symposium which drew our contributors together met over thirty years after Ghana became independent: none of the other states exactly exhibits the bloom of youth. Apologists and analysts sound less and less plausible when they propose inexperience or the malign colonial heritage as excuses for incompetence or failure. These states have, then, reached maturity. Each has an adult generation which grew up in a sunlight unshaded by the *Tricolore* or the Union Jack. Each state is manned by a large, some would say too large, body of professional, expert administrators whose careers have been, with a declining number of exceptions, those of civil servants trained in the management of sovereign states. Each state's armed forces, educational and medical services, industries large and small are directed and manned by Africans whose expertise and experience are considerable. Trial and error over time have allowed them to preserve those elements of colonial practice they admire, to reform or abandon those they deplore, and to innovate where appropriate or necessary. Similarly in the political arena the vast majority of actors have cut their teeth in the post-nationalist era. The choice of methods of operation and strategic decisions are, like managerial decisions anywhere, informed by an international context, but they are ultimately arrived at locally and independently.

This volume differs from its predecessor not least because those who care about and study these states and their inhabitants come to their analysis shorn of the expectations that are inherent in 'newness'. West African states can and must be analysed like any other regional cluster of states. They must then be examined without the essential paternalism that inheres in the terminology of novelty. But, if this 'coming of age' is, as we would argue, a set of discernible and concrete phenomena, it has been accompanied by a remarkable shift in the ideas which inform analysis. In the ten years which separate the initial volume from this, its successor, analysts and politicians alike have experienced not only a rapidly changing world but also rapidly changing ideas about that world.

In those ten years the material basis for many of the apparently established truths about the post-1945 world has changed radically. In the midst of these processes, optimism appears to have died. Liberal democratic thought has been forced to abandon much of its Keynesian underpinning and has adopted at least some of the monetarist reasoning of the Right. Socialist theories have had to be recast in the light of the acknowledged failure of

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planning which relies on large projects rather than individual endeavour. It is of particular importance for us that a degree of almost bizarre convergence has emerged over the question of the state itself. The state, at its blandest a provider of personal security, public amenities and a resolver of conflicts, must be paid for. In all countries, rich or poor, socialist or liberal–democratic, there has emerged serious questioning about whether the state's activities themselves might in some circumstances make it more and more difficult to afford the state.

The expansion of the colonial state, in the period following the Second World War, now can be seen as having prepared the way for the post-independence programmes of West African regimes. The period of welfare colonialism (from 1945 to 1960), with more ambitious programmes notably in the fields of education and communications, thus reinforced the idea of effective control from the centre – with improved roads, more telephone lines, and more bureaucratic manpower. The greatly expanded government departments of the terminal colonial period were not of course very effective, and in other African circumstances the proliferation of new government services at this time indeed arguably led to a decline in government control.¹

The formal centralisation of government in the years following West African independence is thus the prolongation of an existing trend, with accelerated civil service expansion in the service of ambitious development objectives – the dream of industrialisation. This is well enough known, as is the fact that concentration of power at the centre has led to the reality of personal rule in the absence of effective government institutions. The theme of centralisation is developed below notably by the French contributors, but also emerges, for example, in relation to mineral resources in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. Diamonds and oil have thus provided the bulk of government revenue in these states, making possible a greater weight of central government.

The unintended consequences of this formal centralisation in West African states can however be remote from the official intent, as in the case of Senegal where President Diouf's programme of bureaucratisation and centralisation, conceived on the Jacobin model, has in effect created 'empty spaces' into which the government's opponents have moved. Thus Muslim fundamentalists have gained as the government attempts to do without the traditional intermediary services of the *Marabout*, and thus also the independence movement in Casamance has gained as the government again dispenses with the services of that region's political patrons. 'Seeking at all costs to assure its direct social control, the State loses all sense of communication and encourages political adventurism' (C. Coulon and D. B. Cruise O'Brien, chapter 9 below), with repeated riots and the development of a movement for independence in this southern region of Senegal.

This theme, of government losing contact with its social base, recurs in several contributions below, notably in relation to the revolutionary regime of Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso. The plethora of new institutions

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created by the Sankara government – People's Defence Councils, Workers' Defence Councils, Revolutionary Defence Committees – thirty new administrative regions, are revealed as being 'without much grip on reality' (René Otayek, chapter 2 below). The Sankara government's anti-corruption drive, applauded by many foreign sympathisers, stirred mass discontent inside Burkina Faso as patronage resources evaporated (similarly with the attack on bureaucratic overmanning: every dismissed civil servant had sustained a clientele of dependants). Worst of all, this government's attack on chieftaincy, stigmatised as 'feudal' and 'reactionary', was generally unpopular (and particularly resented by the Mossi). The chiefs came closer to being a legitimate authority than anything established by the revolution, which helps to explain the apparent indifference of the Burkinabé at the time of Sankara's death.

The tendency to a separation of state from society may have been particularly evident in this case, at least retrospectively, but it lurks in many of the cases reviewed below. It is in this context that one may understand the continuing fascination of popular elections. 'Democracy' under West African conditions may provide a convenient pretext to extend the powers of the head of state, a means for the president to get rid of his unwanted subordinates (Yves Fauré on Côte d'Ivoire, chapter 5 below) or to ensure his supply of foreign aid, but it would be wrong for an outside observer wholly to dismiss the electoral exercise. Ordinary people may make serious personal sacrifices in casting their votes, risking violence and intimidation, as Fred Hayward rightly remarks of Sierra Leone, chapter 10 below. Internal elections within a single (or dominant) party are furthermore often keenly contested, and provide for a considerable turnover in personnel among the political class, with the voters' motivation sharpened by the prospect of access to official patronage.

Elections in West Africa nonetheless are obviously a weak instrument in the constitution of a government, with rigging and official manipulation a prevalent pattern. Accountability under such conditions remains a distant dream, a situation deplored by Flt.-Lt. Jerry Rawlings among others, although it is possible to discern the outlines of a regional variant: thus the notables of the True Whig Party in Liberia were 'accountable not in any effective electoral fashion, but at least in the attenuated sense that local political activity was required in order to gain the party nomination for congressional seats, while local legislators were expected to spend much of their time in their constituencies' (Christopher Clapham, chapter 7 below). The downfall of the True Whig Party, Africa's longest-running single party, with the Doe coup of 1980, thus could imply an actual decline in accountability despite the parade of multi-party elections in 1985.

While mass elections provide no more than a distorted medium for the government to hear the people's voice, contact between government and people may be more effectively provided by the intermediary auspices of chiefs as in Burkina Faso/Upper Volta or Muslim notables as in Senegal.

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Such intermediaries, building their economic and political power on the basis of an authentic popular authority, may also be seen as possible providers of government by patrimonialism, in contradistinction to the faltering project of government by the bureaucratic state. These intermediaries may be seen as providing a continuation of the colonial principle of government by indirect rule, although they are also together capable of self-defence when threatened by today's central power – *La revanche des sociétés Africaines*.²

The revenge of African societies provides a heading under which one may include not only the instruments whereby chiefs can resist central government, including the politics of the supernatural and the manipulation of kinship as in Burkina Faso, but also the survival strategies whereby the individual seeks to do without the state – *vivre sénégalaisement* – as they say in Dakar. One should also mention ways in which religious organisations can provide a refuge from the state, as for example with both Catholicism and Islam in Burkina.

Representation of popular opinion has its channels even in the authoritarian circumstances of most West African states. A considerable freedom of the press should be mentioned here, notably in the cases of Cameroon, Senegal or Nigeria, thus the possibility of some political influence on the part of those who write for, produce or own this press. Institutional representation is also possible, notably in the case of the trade union movement, even when this is in principle under government control. The political role of the trade union appears to oscillate between that of the tribune of the people, acting as the vanguard of popular protest and on occasion precipitating the *coup d'état*, and the apparently opposed role of protector of the privilege of a civil service elite. Most of the unionised labour force being in some form of government employment, the trade union is inevitably called to the defence of bureaucratic overmanning when the new austerities of the International Monetary Fund are invoked. Some institutions can act effectively enough in the defence of their own interests, as when the bank holds up its paperwork in Sierra Leone to prevent government from imposing a new oil supplier.

Personal rule in West African states, however, does of course involve a general weakening of institutions, a trend well exemplified below in the case of the Stevens regime in Sierra Leone with its sapping of the life of universities, agricultural cooperatives, farmers' associations, business and professional organisations. Linkages between the ruler and society in such circumstances proceed by a series of patron–client ties, amounting to a state-wide network (Siaka Stevens in this case perfecting what Albert Margai had begun). Even in such circumstances, however, one may remark a continuing autonomy of chiefs, professionals, and even ordinary people, with the Back-benchers' Association providing 'the only effective mechanism of criticism in Parliament' (Fred Hayward, chapter 10 below).

The most basic attributes of the state, in the collection of tax and the provision of law and order, can be called seriously into question here. Thus

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President Goukouni in Chad frankly announced in 1981 that the government (GUNT) 'does not dispose of any power, or finances, or regional administrative authority over ... factions which constitute real states within the state. The GUNT is a government only in name.' As Robert Buijtenhuijs notes, the central government of Chad for three years (1979–82) 'lost control of almost the whole country, with the exception of parts of the capital'. Taxes were not collected, the civil service was not paid in the north of Chad, such trade as continued was by smuggling, such postal services as continued were maintained by the missionaries, with road maintenance by the Coton-Chad company. Chad is, however, the extreme case among West African states, in this period of Frolinat disintegration and warlord rule. But extremes can be revealing: law in West African circumstances is less by state courts than by the informal arbitration of chiefs, religious leaders or other patrons. Tax in West Africa is more by levies on major commercial operators at the customs post and on hapless peasant producers at the marketing board, than it is by any personal income tax – difficult to collect, and resented. The citizen's involvement with the state tends not to be close, and it is not only in Senegal that he or she seeks to avoid contact with the state so far as possible.

Some recent commentary has revelled in this reality, seeing in tax evasion, 'second economies', and in smuggling and banditry a romantic resistance to the state.³ It is easy to forget that in such circumstances those who enjoy enough autonomy to be able to pose as tropical Robin Hoods tend to be the powerful. For the poor, for the majority, the state alone can provide major medical facilities like mass immunisation, pipe-borne water, pensions, law and order, relief at times of catastrophe and a wide range of other life-sustaining functions. Although each and every one of such vital functions can be subverted and corrupted into exploitation and cruel misuse of vulnerable people, there are widespread civic expectations. These are perhaps most visible in the evident general support for campaigns to curb flagrant abuses of office. One of the explanations for the tenacity of the state at a time when many predicted its disappearance in many parts of Africa, is the widespread understanding of the less predatory and crucial roles of the state. In a situation of a war of all against all, the vast majority of people lose and this is widely understood.

The legitimacy of rulers against such a background can indeed be seen as the 'occupational delusion' of those in power. It is more realistic for an outsider to speak of acceptance than legitimacy, as Christopher Clapham remarks of Liberia below. If Weberian categories are to be drastically adjusted in dealing with West African politics, severe adjustment is again in order when we come to the Marxian categories of social class. West African businessmen have succeeded in differentiating themselves, while 'straddling' between private and public employment.⁴ Such private business is of course heavily dependent on the state throughout West Africa – for import licences, price controls, contracts, and extra-legal tolerance – although the successful

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businessmen do seek to develop their commercial contacts and investment opportunities throughout the industrial world. Jean-François Bayart in his treatment of entrepreneurs in the case of Cameroon, chapter 3 below, finds little of the spirit of capitalism (or, for that matter, of bureaucracy) but an elegantly typified mesh of public and private interests: 'a field of interests intimately mingled by contracts, by credit, by acquisitions, by marriages'. It is absurd in such a context to try to differentiate between a 'national' bourgeoisie and its 'comprador' ugly sister, or between a national and an administrative bourgeoisie. The salient fact is that the businessmen have emerged, that they are largely but not wholly dependent on the state; with a little luck, they can always move themselves and their fortunes elsewhere when times get hard.

Where social class is concerned, it is the peasantry which perhaps provides the greatest challenge to analysis. In most West African states the bulk of state revenue has of course been derived from agricultural production, building on the gains of commercialisation in the colonial period. The cash crop producers (peasants) since independence have been subordinated to the state marketing boards (another continuation from the colonial period) in effect paying a high rate of tax to these monopsony organisations. While in Marxian economic terms the peasantry obviously is an exploited class, it is a class without common consciousness or organisation. Peasants, however, can mount an effective enough resistance to exploitation at the hands of the state: such resistance tends to be desperate, by withdrawing from commercial agriculture in favour of subsistence crops or by leaving the land and migrating to town in the hope of employment.

It is striking that the apparently benevolent official attempts to 'help' the peasantry in West Africa have often accomplished the opposite of the avowed intent. Thus the colonial marketing boards, established to regularise production and (so it was said) to provide an insurance against bad years, have succeeded year after year in remorselessly over-taxing the West African peasantry.⁵ Jerry Rawlings has recognised the dimensions of this problem: 'We are acknowledging the historic debt of the whole nation to the farmer and have thus repudiated the monstrous injustice of a past in which we virtually ran the machinery of the state on the tired backs of rural producers and provided little for their basic needs' (in Richard Jeffries on Ghana, chapter 6 below). The Sankara regime in Burkina Faso was similarly committed at least in rhetoric to redressing this wrong, but the institutions established by government in the rural areas were bitterly resented: it is of interest to note here that Rawlings in Ghana appears to have recognised a similar peasant resentment, by abolishing the People's Defence Committees. Like the Revolutionary Defence Committees in Burkina Faso, the People's Defence Committees in Ghana were made up of militants imposed from the centre, and Richard Jeffries very reasonably asks why the peasants' urban benefactors have never considered the provision of genuinely representative institutions for the rural producers.

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If the categories of social class (bourgeois, worker, peasant) are difficult to adjust to West African conditions, one might perhaps expect a political analysis in terms of ethnicity to come closer to social reality. Some useful reservations are, however, suggested here, in the case of Cameroon, by Jean-François Bayart, suggesting a 'contextual' approach to the subject of ethnicity. Ethnic identification is thus to be understood as always in movement, and as providing the individual with one among many identities. The relation of ethnicity to political action is by no means always close: one excellent example here is that of the political rivalry between Goukouni and Habré in Chad, a segmentary clash among Toubous and not at all rooted in the fundamental north/south division of the country. Bayart usefully distinguishes between commercial networks, which are pluri-ethnic by the necessities of business, and the networks of clientelist politics which are commonly structured along ethnic lines. The position of the head of state is then to be understood, in Cameroon as elsewhere in West Africa, as that of an arbiter between networks, drawing his own power from the discordant ambitions of the commercial and political worlds.

Religious identifications are to be considered in conjunction with those of ethnicity, notably with reference to the coast/inland or north/south divisions which are to be remarked in so many West African states. Here again one has to beware of misleading simplicities: thus the northern region of Cameroon under Ahidjo, as the northern region of Nigeria under Ahmadu Bello, was a 'false monolith' created by a skilful political actor rather than an immutable social reality. The north/south division of Chad is similarly only one aspect of social or political reality: Chad is thus 'multiple' as well as 'double', with dozens of ethnic groups to consider as well as segmentary or personal rivalries. In Liberia, again, it is not enough to think in terms of political conflict between the Americo-Liberian settlers and the indigenes: since the Doe coup the important political divisions have been between hinterland people, although Americo-Liberians have continued to do well enough on the basis of their skills, both in the state administration and in the professions (Christopher Clapham, below: this preservation of social position on the part of the Americo-Liberians is to be compared with the communal self-defence mounted for over forty years by the Krios in Sierra Leone).⁶

The cross-cutting nature of socio-political divisions, ethnic or regional not to speak of religious, commercial or personal, may help to explain the absence of any successful separatist movement in West Africa. It is in any case remarkable that there has been no separatist movement in Chad despite the civil wars in that country since 1969: the suggestion of Robert Buijtenhuijs below is that part of the explanation here must lie in the policies of neighbouring states. Cameroon and Nigeria, each with its own north/south problem, would thus have acted to stifle any would-be independent state of southern Chad. Among the cases dealt with below, and excluding the case of Biafra, the secessionist impulse is most clearly

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represented in the case of Casamance. But in this case also one may expect a negative diplomatic consensus to be organised by what Julius Nyerere once described as that 'trade union of heads of states', the Organisation of African Unity.

The political party is also an institution capable of a positive contribution to the survival of the West African state. Thus in Cameroon or in Senegal the governing party can be seen as allowing for a very broad alliance of different communal segments of the country's elite, under the overall authority of the head of party and state. Elections within the governing party are, potentially at least, matters of greater political substance than has been recognised by most outside commentators on West African politics. The governing party in such cases may even provide a more effective channel of communication, between the capital and the outlying regions, than the institutions of state administration. Nor is multi-party politics to be lightly derided, even if an opposition party has yet to win a national election in West Africa (with one marginal exception, in Sierra Leone in 1967). Dr Naomi Chazan has drawn attention to the underlying reality of a two-party situation in Ghana from the nineteen-fifties until recent years:⁷ a similar assessment could be made of Senegal (Senghor/Diouf versus Lamine Guèye/Abdoulaye Wade). Periodic episodes of multi-party politics in Nigeria have also of course suggested a real continuity of popular political allegiances, from 1959 to 1979. And in Liberia the downfall of the True Whig Party, with the *coup d'état* of Samuel Doe, showed the ex-members of that party to be capable of political survival in a way which also showed the ex-party to be 'more deeply rooted than might previously have seemed to be the case' (Christopher Clapham below).

Political parties in West Africa may indeed correspond to a significant social reality, but it goes without saying that parties have rarely decided the question of succession to the office of head of state. The withdrawal of several democratically elected heads of state over the past decade (Leopold Senghor, Ahmadu Ahidjo, Siaka Stevens) was in each case in favour of a nominated successor. Popular elections then provided a means of ratifying a succession which had already been decided by the outgoing incumbent – a procedure more monarchical than democratic. More commonly in West Africa the succession is decided by military coup, although in the region this need not involve extensive bloodletting: the succession of senior military officers in Nigeria by a sort of Kaduna quadrille is discussed by Shehu Othman (chapter 8 below). But in general terms it remains the case that one can have little confidence in regular procedures for succession in West African states, yet another indicator of the institutional weakness prevalent in the region.

The issue of foreign involvement in the politics of West African states is raised by several contributions below, notably in respect of the continuing role of France in the internal affairs of her ex-colonies. The balance sheet of such dependency is not necessarily a negative one: thus Richard Jeffries, in commenting on the 'catastrophic' financial independence of Ghana in the Acheampong years, contrasts this with the financial stability of the Ivory

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Coast – assured among other things by the latter's reliance on the CFA franc. France has not only given a stable currency to her ex-colonies, but military sinews in the form of bases in key states and defence agreements. Such agreements do of course involve a continuing dependence on France, although a dependence which is accepted by West African rulers as some sort of insurance against the *coup d'état*. The insurance is probably of declining effectiveness, due to changes in military technology and in French diplomatic priorities.⁸ The dependence should not be seen as going only in one direction: the political career of Hissein Habré is an eloquent testimony to the possibilities of manipulation on the part of the dependant, as he has played the United States against France in drawing the latter more deeply into the conflict with Libya than the French government would no doubt have wished. The manipulation of a dependent relationship by the rulers of France's African client states, notably by the massaging of French public opinion through French journalists who are themselves clients of the African rulers, has been dealt with elsewhere by Jean-François Bayart.⁹

Analysis of African politics in terms of dependency is out of fashion now, and dependency is not a central consideration in any of the contributions below. There is perhaps some irony here, in that the fiscal collapse of many West African states has made them more than ever dependent on loans from outsiders, very often the International Monetary Fund. IMF loans with their attached 'conditionalities' specify a requisite programme of government retrenchment involving the dismissal of many in government service. But while many West African opposition politicians like to emphasise the indignity of having to submit to the IMF *diktat*, there is some evidence that the heads of state have taken to the task of retrenchment with some relish. Thus Félix Houphouët-Boigny uses a programme of government austerity to crack the whip over his over-mighty barons of the parastatals, and Jerry Rawlings finds ground for convergence between IMF requirements and his own populist image, while General Babangida 'imposes monetarist policies which [are] far more radical than the IMF itself required' (Shehu Othman, below).

One may ask finally whether the study of West African states requires a new vocabulary, a radical reassessment of past approaches to the subject. Consider for example the assessment of the PNDC government in Ghana, which 'now gives the appearance of being suspended in mid-air, lacking any institutional social roots' (Richard Jeffries, below), or the assessment of the incapacities of the Liberian state: 'whether the state can actually do anything, in a developmental sense, remains an open question ... it has hardly tried' (Christopher Clapham, below). The state in West Africa is thus often of feeble administrative capacity, raising little in the way of taxes, providing little in the way of law and even less of services. It is remarkable here that the most forceful and cogent criticisms of the African state have recently come from young Francophone African scholars, notably from the excellent work of Comi Tulabor and Achille Mbembe. Dr Tulabor sees the 'state of