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Politics in Central Africa: A Reflective Introduction to The Experience of States and Region

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It is timely and appropriate to write on "politics in Central Africa". It is a region which is under the spotlight; it is an epoch making region which carries the crisis of the Great Lakes states, the destabilisation of Angola, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and so on. In Joseph Conrad's terms, it is a region which forms the "heart of darkness." In the same perspective of gloom and catastrophe, it could be said that Central Africa manifests the anarchy prophesied by Morton Kaplan in the early 1990s. Such a pathological state has led to the imposition of both real and symbolic ways of constructing and analysing reality in African studies (Zezeza, 1997). The preponderance of the literature of the "pathology" of the Africanist "ideascap" is a guarantee of the literary and so-called scientific success of Central Africa (*Africa Today*, 1998; Du Bois, De Gaudusson and Gaud, 1996; Bach et Sindjoun, 1997). Having said that, I should also add that I consider writings on Central Africa are important and perceptive. Now, I want to shed light on the circular relationship which exists between "pathological states" and pessimistic social scientists. It is worth repeating that social scientists significantly contribute to the construction of ways of analysing and conceptualising their chosen enterprise. Consequently, "epistemological" vigilance is required with respect to the quality of publications on Central Africa. Is it possible and acceptable in the scientific milieu, which has so far dominated the production of knowledge on Africa, to write on Central Africa without using, for example, the conceptual categories of "dictatorship" "authoritarianism", "civil war", "crisis of nation state"? (refer, for example, to the contributions of Anne Sundberg and Owona Nguini in this volume). The reality of Africa seems to be already conceptualised and I am not sure that, we the authors of this volume of essays, have completely

escaped this trap of preconceived notions. At least, we are aware of the danger of a *priori* categories. It is important to point out that facilitating repetition and routinization of the discourse on Central Africa has to do with the conservative functioning of the Africanist community. The normalization of the discourse on the pathology of Africa is not only the verdict of reality, but also an effect of institutionalisation of a particular tradition of research on Africa through referential journals, classic authors, great associations and meetings.

One must not believe in the fantasy of a plot. Meanwhile, according to Bourdieu there can be an orchestration without a maestro (Pinto, 1998), in which case we might have an orchestration without a conscious plan, but based nonetheless on mutual adjustments inspired by the common sense of the individual members of the orchestra. In this regard, it is worth noting that Jean François Bayart influences the sense of the analysis in Africa (in French) when he moves from “politics from below” to “politics of the belly” and recently to the “criminalisation of the state”. Such influence is based not only on the pertinence of his argument but also on its strength. Jean François Bayart is the Africanist “ideascape” (co-founder and former editor in Chief of *Politique Africaine*, Director of a prestigious French research centre on International Relations and Comparative Politics, a series director of the Africanist publisher Karthala, Director of a journal of international relations – *Critique Internationale*). (Bayart, 1989, 1992, 1997). Central Africa as an opportune research theme is the result both of events unfolding in that area, and the thematic trend in the Africanist milieu.

Having in mind these determinations, through a reflexive sociology (Bourdieu, 1992), the researcher increases the possibility of an objective analysis. Central Africa as a unit of analysis then remains questionable. Obviously, “Central Africa” implies the regionalisation of African studies, the legitimization of area studies. But Central Africa as a unit of analysis is more an abstraction of the reality, a theoretical construct rather than a thesis. It is not part of the literature on “out of one, many Africas” (Martin and West, 1999). The crisis of the African continental metageography (Okafor, 1998), of the African continental metaidentity (Appiah, 1992) is well documented and convincingly presented. According to the French geographer Denis Retaille: (my translation)

“... the current world-wide simultaneity [due to globalisation] reintroduces a possible definition of the continent by way of being, by the relation with the world instead of inherited lands bearing each one genuine civilisation” (Retaille, 1997: 73).

From this perspective, what is called the African continent is fragmented into multiple locations. At this level, the location is defined from the categories of spontaneous geography: a location implies a high density of social relations, of

exchanges and networks (Retaille, 1997: 79-102). In this respect, the use of the unifying labels such as “Africa” has the potential of being a source of hindrance and impoverishment rather than a helpful tool in articulating this multiplicity of locations. Given the reality of the multiplicity of locations in Africa, is it opportune to put in the same semantic basket states and areas which do not form a system, having a high degree of interaction? In the sense of the “new geography”, the notion of “equatorial Africa” proposed by Mahmood Mamdani to redesignate Africa as stretching from Sahara to the Limpopo, is contestable (Mamdani, 1998: 2). According to Mahmood Mamdani (1998: 2) “stretching from Sahara to Limpopo, Equatorial Africa is united by a common century of experience from slave trade to a late colonialism already beginning to move away from direct to indirect rule”. The conceptual difficulty here is the customary recourse of Africanist scholars to naturalistic adjectives to characterise what is supposed to be a historical unity as Equatorial Africa. This tendency of unifying Africa into homogeneous spaces is more the point of view of ardent advocates such as Mamdani than a reflection of the reality itself, which is less homogeneous.

The enchantment with the ideal of “many Africas” seems to be symmetrical to the disenchantment with “One Africa”. It is a paradigmatic (and political) shift from one extreme to another. “Out of one” Africa is a fragile starting point of analysis. It is clear to a certain extent that the pan-Africanist ideology (embodied politically and scientifically by Kwame Nkrumah and Cheikh Anta Diop, respectively) has been an obstacle to knowledge of Africa. From the point of view of validation, what is closer to the reality is the dialectics of “One Africa” and “multiple Africas”. There is a unitary formalisation of Africa which has to be taken seriously. That socio-political construction can be ascertained through different elements, for instance:

- the grouping of all the African States around the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) which talks in the international arena on behalf of “One Africa”;
- the permanence of the pan-Africanist perspective as affirmed by proposals for an African Common Market, or United States of Africa;
- The pan-African imaginary which uses slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and physical geography in order to construct an African identity.

But the idea of “One Africa” does not have dominance over the reality. It is as much in conflict with, as it is complementary to “multiple Africas”. “One Africa” and “Multiple Africas” are not immutable categories. They are methods of analysis and observation, which refer to different objects. Neither is more valid than the other. Each of them is a construct – a researcher’s view of reality. Because they are mere constructs, “One Africa” and “Many Africas” are relative. They imply a selection of objects. Due to the artificiality of “One Africa” and “Many Africas”,

one cannot claim pre-eminence over the other. They do not imply fetishism of either diversity or homogeneity. The two are different representations of the same reality, of the same actions and institutions. What is at stake is the choice of the method of observation and analysis.

This volume is based on “multiple Africas” with neither prejudice to the notion of “One Africa” nor making a fetish of plurality. It is a didactic choice, a choice whose objective is to help to contribute to the knowledge of specific objects under the umbrella of the Central Africa region.

I should now turn to other issues. What follows introduces two points, which I shall substantiate in the remainder of this introductory essay. The first point is devoted to Central Africa as a region, and the second one will focus on the analysis of politics in Central Africa.

Problematising Central Africa as a Region

Conventional African studies and diplomatic practices seem to designate Central Africa as a natural region. This geographical and diplomatic entity must be questioned. What is Central Africa? Does Central Africa constitute a region? What is the pertinence of “politics in Central Africa”?

The idea of Central Africa is problematic. It produces competing images of the reality. Out of the many definitions of Central Africa I wish to deal only with the political and institutional definitions. These are the dominant definitions, which shape vision as well as action. This is because politics and institutions are determinants in the construction of reality (Goodin, 1996: 1-53). I shall merely sketch my argument that Central Africa refers to a plurality of realities.

- French colonisation created a specific sense of Central Africa, which is linked to a former colonial regrouping “French Equatorial Africa”, consisting of Chad, Gabon, Central Africa Republic and Congo. After independence, Central Africa was then constituted as a sphere of French influence (see the contribution of Ayissi Ngah in this volume), as a club of former French colonies. This colonial legacy was appropriated by the post-colonial states, and recreated in 1964 as the Central African Customs and Economic Union (UDEAC).

This post-colonial pathway to regional integration has further influenced other interpretations of Central Africa, namely:

- the launching of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC) in 1987 consisting of parts of Central Africa: Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Gabon, Burundi, Rwanda, Sao-Tome and Principe, Chad, former Zaire and Congo;
- the formation in the early 1990’s of the United Nations Standing Committee for security issues, as part of CEEAC, which included

Angola (see the contributions of Ayissi Ngah and Musifiky Mwanasali in this volume).

States which are supposed to be part of Central Africa, are involved in other regional formations. This is the case with the Democratic Republic of Congo which is part of regional organizations in Central Africa and in Southern Africa (see the contribution of Tandeka Nkiwane). It is also the case with Cameroon, which sometimes takes part in regional meetings for West Africa, and is represented on organizations such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission, which comprises Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Rwanda is part of Eastern and Central Africa regional groupings – i.e., a member of both the Economic Community of Central Africa States (CEEAC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), as is the Democratic Republic of Congo.

What follows shows the fluidity of regional identities, where some of states straddle multiple regions. (See Tandeka Nkiwane's contribution in this volume; also Shaw, 1998). There is also a fragmentation of Central Africa through sub-regional specificities like the Great Lakes Region. The autonomy of the Great Lakes region was institutionalised by the Economic Community of Great Lakes States (CEPLG) made up of Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (the former Zaire). The Central Africa of the media and diplomatic community seems to be reduced to the Great Lakes region. This definition of Central Africa is characterised by the "pathology" of the situation and location on the one hand, and the necessity for peacekeeping and conflict resolution on the other (Bayart, 1997: 185-202). There is also the tendency to deal with Central Africa as news – as a problem for peace and security (refer to the contribution of Patrick Quantin in this volume). This perception conflates Central Africa with the Great Lakes Region, which carries the guilt of Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, as well as the crises in Burundi and DRC.

Furthermore, "Central Africa" is not a homogeneous entity despite the attempt at naturalizing it through "Bantu Africa," as epitomised by Gabon's action in favour of an organisation for Bantu civilisation (CICIBA). This is a further vindication of the view that Central Africa is indeed a shifting configuration, evolving and changing continuously. Consequently, it cannot be comprehended outside its historical and material realities. However, I would argue that this changing configuration is in accordance with the logic of states. This is why there is also a redefinition and transformation of French influence, generally perceived as the "gendarme" of the region (see the contributions of Tandeka Nkiwane, Ayissi Ngah, and Martin Ebolo in this volume).

"Central Africa" is a structured context of action and opportunities which is subjected to different conjunctures. The current conjuncture of war in DRC and

crisis in Burundi and Rwanda reveals the fluidity and the porosity of "Central Africa". For instance, "Central Africa" interacts with "Eastern Africa" and "Southern Africa" through DRC. In this sense, therefore, "Central Africa" is not a monolithic entity. (See the contributions of Patrick Quantin and Tandeka Nkiwane.) It is an institutionalised fiction which produces effects of reality that orientates the actors involved towards a network of regional organisations and specific regional identities. (See the contributions of Musifiky Mwanasali, Patrick Quantin, and Owona Nguini in this volume). Therefore, each regional organisation is a manufactured space.

The institutionalisation of Central Africa as a region is an excellent case of the manufacturing of space. The point here is not the assessment of the degree of regional integration in Central Africa. Rather, what is at stake is the understanding of Central Africa as a region. This is because it is not possible to talk about Central Africa without presupposing a region. Central Africa, as a category of perception and a division of space refers to a region; it is an attempt to create an "us" versus "them" distinction among states based on geographical solidarity, which is politically organized. The region is structured by politics of real or fictive solidarity, by a politics of geographic affection and interconnected interests. The region connotes different and complementary elements: geographic proximity of a group of countries, states with a shared sense of communal identity, etc. (Mansfield and Milner, 1997: 3-4). Despite the positioning of regionalism as one of the dominant narratives of contemporary international relations (Mansfield and Milner, 1997; Lake and Morgan, 1997; Fawcett and Hurrell, 1995), it is important to go beyond the fetishism of the word to resist its magic and apprehend its concrete existence in different contexts.

Central Africa as a region is a consolidation of the Addis Ababa order. It refers to the formation of a system of states based on non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, peaceful co-existence, and respect for each other's territorial integrity. Contrary to Bayart's analysis (Bayart, 1998: 55-73), the current crisis in Central Africa is not responsible for the formation of systems of states. The system of states in Africa has always been part of the post-colonial era (Kontchou Kouomegni, 1977; Zartman, 1966). The Addis Ababa order is present in Central Africa through the definition of the region by states. The perception and the presentation of Central Africa as a region are determined by interstate organisations like the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) (former UDEAC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC) (see the contribution of Owona Nguini). These organisations institutionalise a region and express a degree of "regionality". In the same direction, patterns of regional security are important: the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC) elaborated a non-aggression pact in 1996: in February 1999, a security mechanism was launched; and so on. (See the contribu-

tion of Musifiki Mwanasali). Different institutions and norms indicate the constitution of Central Africa as a region. This is how "Central Africa" becomes a space of "we", of "us", i.e., "a space of sense" (Läidi, 1998). Above all, the interstate normative and institutional culture of Central Africa as regionalism is reinforced at the national level by a constitutional law of regional integration.

The post-Addis Ababa order is not an absolute demarcation from normative pillars of the state system; it is an expression which suggests a flexible intellectual posture, combining the real and the fictional, the respect for, and subversion of, the Addis Ababa order. By post-Addis Ababa, I am referring to the systematisation of actions compromising Addis Ababa in terms of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, proliferation of non-state actors and so on. Contrary to the notion of a "post-Westphalian order" (Lyons and Mastanduno, 1995), the "post-Addis Ababa order" is not completely subjected to transnationalisation. I wish to indicate that the Addis Ababa order is dynamic and can be reinterpreted. The operationalisation of the post-Addis Ababa paradigm in Central Africa helps us to understand conflictual relations (within nation-states – for example, the DRC, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, etc.); as well as transnational conflicts (DRC – Rwanda – Burundi – Angola) in the formation of a regional bloc. The regionalisation of conflicts is only possible in an area of interdependence. The effects of the conflicts (refugees, circulation of weapons, etc.) encourage or justify formal regionalisation (see the contribution of Musifiki Mwanasali) (Deng and al., 1996: 145-165). In that perspective, non-state actors (refugees, mercenaries, etc.) can be actors in a regional integration.

The region, as mentioned above, is influenced by geographic solidarity. But one may ask whether the unity among states is a sufficient criterion for tackling "politics in Central Africa". The legitimacy of such interrogation is reinforced by the diversity of political agendas in Central Africa – from one state to another, even within one state like Cameroon (Francophone agenda, anglophone agenda) (see the contributions of Anne Sundberg And Owona Nguini in this volume). The belonging of states to the same regional setting is not a sufficient condition for the generalisation of political analysis. This assertion is validated by the absence of an agreed institutional framework for political unity, which the European Union provides in the case of Western Europe.

In spite of the above critique, I submit that the possibility of envisaging "politics in Central Africa" remains open. In fact, by using the paradigm of interdependence of societies (Nye, 1993: 160-179), it is possible to perceive indirect or direct exchanges, communication of political experiences and values. The relative diffusion of the politics of civil war in Central Africa has to do with transnational linkages between Rwanda and Burundi, Rwanda and DRC, etc. The quasi-simultaneity of democratisation processes in early 1990's in all the states of Central Africa is partly an effect of such geographic proximity. The regional system of

states exerts a constraint that is more implicit than explicit in this case. The constraint is appreciated in terms of honour-seeking at the level of the region. This is the trend in parliamentary politics; i.e., the foreclosure of physical violence and consolidation of competitive election as the only legitimate political game. The notion of "parliamentary politics" (which is borrowed from Norbert Elias' notion of "parliamentary states") refers in the Eliasian perspective (Elias, 1994) to the "sportization" of politics, i.e., the postulation of the legitimacy of competition, the consecration of adversarial politics and fair play. The relative "parliamentarisation" of politics in Central Africa is occurring in Gabon and Cameroon. In such countries, parliamentary politics is in opposition to military politics i.e., politics of normalisation of physical violence and consecration of violence as constituting the regime of truth and action in the politics of the nation-state. In contrast, military politics is embodied by Rwanda, Congo, DRC, etc. (See the contributions of Patrick Quantin; Sundberg; Ebolo, and Owona Nguini in this volume). Parliamentary politics and military politics are not necessarily absolutely antithetical in the reality. Processes of restoration of authority have resulted political hybridity. Recent developments in Equatorial Guinea and Chad (Luckham, 1998: 1-45), for example, the dynamics of sultanistic regimes (Chelabi et Linz, 1998) present excellent situations where the parliamentary tendency seems to converge with an equally prevalent tendency towards totalitarian governance.

The categories of parliamentary politics and military politics are not the quintessence of politics in Central Africa. These two seemingly contradictory tendencies in reality aim at helping to make a minimal and modest synthesis based on the criterion of state – society relations. "Parliamentary politics" focuses on democratisation and its relative consolidation; "Military politics" emphasises authoritarianism, diffusion of war culture and privatisation of violence (Mbembe, 1999: 3-63). Politics in Central Africa is not unidimensional. It refers to a plurality of practices, actions, representations and institutions which disrupt social relations and create opportunities for dominance. Yet, the emergence of parliamentary politics has not succeeded in finally replacing either military politics (see the contribution of Anne Sundberg), or the politics of (relative) dependence (see the contributions of Ebolo and Ayissi Ngah). I must therefore conclude this section with the caution that the complexity of politics in Central Africa, as everywhere (Olowu and al., 1999), is confronted with different paradigms.

Theorising Politics In Central Africa

It is not my intention to propose a theory nor a paradigm of politics in Central Africa. Rather, I wish to take advantage of existing theories and paradigms to discuss the subject. I want to narrow my analytical area of investigation by postulating that "politics in Central Africa" is not the revenge of regional knowledge on continental knowledge of African politics. One level of analysis does not

include the other; each represents certain possibilities and constraints for the researcher. However, it is pertinent to acknowledge that, to some extent, the generalisation of ideas and conclusions about politics in Africa has detracted from the reality because of its prevailing tendency of universalising what is often specific and particular. I think that the tendency to indulge in generalisations about African politics is too present in "African studies". One of its most recent expressions refers to Mahmood Mamdani's book, *Citizen and Subject* (1996). In his objective "to establish that apartheid, is actually the generic form of the colonial state in Africa" (1996: 8), Mamdani normalises South Africa under apartheid. If apartheid is by analogy de-dramatised, and considered as colonisation, then homogenisation becomes the regime of analysis. If we accept Mamdani's thesis, then apartheid within the iron law of colonialism is an intellectual fallacy due to the illusion of generality!

It is necessary to go beyond the magic of concepts in order to apprehend their real social life. In Central Africa, the realities of colonialism differed from Belgian Congo (considered at a time as the Belgian King's property) to Cameroon, whose status from 1916 to 1960 was a trusteeship colonised by the French and British under a UN mandate. Colonialism is a complex phenomenon. The different practices, which occurred under its banner, defy reductionism and banal analogies. What is important and scientifically pertinent is not the "absolutization" of similarities or specificities. What is paramount is whether or not we can comprehend and operationalise a scientific approach in order to organise the analysis of an area or a social fact in such a way that it helps discussion and dialogue in comparison with analysis made about other areas and social facts. It is equally pertinent to keep in mind that generalisation is no guarantee of scientific truth, even if it produces the illusion of a grand theory.

Now, without any pretension to be exhaustive, I want to analyze some past attempts at theorising about politics in Africa. There are no theories specific to Central Africa. But it is challenging to see how already existing theories and paradigms can be operationalised to explain politics in Central Africa.

Theorizing on politics in Central Africa has been and continues to be an enterprise of stigmatisation and denigration. As Zeleza (1997: 125) put it, "Epithets, anecdotes, and caricature have replaced sober analysis. Racist and racializing tropes have been coined as the most denigrating labels" in the discourse on African politics. The state is often described as "predatory", "collapsed", "kleptocratic", "precarious", "non-developmental" and so on (Nnoli, 1999: 9). The use of epithets is not a *priori* suspicious. In political science language, the use of epithet is acceptable if it is derived from a rigorous observation rather than as a conclusion based on imposed realities. However, political science by means of epithets is to be questioned. To quote what Edward Said wrote on the "Covering of Islam" in the US, politics in (Central) Africa "can be characterized limitlessly

by means of a handful of recklessly generalised and repeatedly deployed clichés” (Said, 1997).

It is not scientifically pertinent to organize, in the context of “political science” by pejorative epithets, a defence and an illustration of politics in (Central) Africa through a political science of “us” against “them”. The politics of seductive and impressive book’s title [“politics of belly” (Bayart, 1989), “Africa Works: Disorder as Political instrument” (Chabal and Daloz, 1998)] is determined by urgencies of marketing. This is oversimplified and nourished cliché and reductionism about politics in Africa and Central Africa. Sensational titles can obscure the complexity of the reality and the relativity of scientific knowledge. “Politics of belly” or “criminalization” do not subsume politics in Africa. Even more striking is the tendency of conceptualization and innovations in African studies. To be precise, these are parochial conceptual innovations that sometimes “break the doors” already opened by sociological theories. What does the expression “Politics of belly” brings other than finding new ways of using the Weberian category of patriarchy? (Bozzoli, 1998).

“Political science of pejorative epithets” introduces a problem of validation. As a consequence, denigration and being pejorative are rendered possible when value judgement replaces observation and analysis. The challenge is to make politics in (Central) Africa as intelligible as the reality, and not to measure the gap, which may exist between it and what is considered as the model. The dichotomy of the enchanted model and the disenchanting reality is common in the analysis of states in Africa. States are generally compared with the so-called Western model. The analysis is either a celebration of the extent to which the model has been reproduced in the local milieu; or it is condemnation of the differences between the Western ideal and the reality. In this way, the real life of politics in a specific milieu is ignored. The validation problem arises from the fact that the celebration or the denigration of the distance between the supposed trademark states and the real states, as the case may be, is not based on objective analysis. According to Patrick Chabal and Jean – Pascal Daloz (1999: 11)

“... it is clear that the type of state established in Africa turned out to be a mere shadow of the original”.

Such assessments ignore tragically the local dynamics of state appropriation and reinvention from which local actors make meaning. I would interpret the state in Africa differently from Bayart (1989). For example, the way he uses the concept of trajectory of African states minimises rupture with the colonial system, and privileges the “longue durée”. My approach to the reinvention of the state in Africa emphasises the colonial rupture as a determinant point, and seeks to make sense of the re-appropriation of pre-coloniality.

By emphasising the concrete life of states, the endeavour is not the consecration of extreme cultural relativity but the operationalisation of conceptual categories of political science. Contrary to the essentialist and substantialist use and critique of concepts such as civil society (Mamdani, 1996: 13-16; Mamdani, 1995: 602-616; Chabal and Daloz, 1999), it is not interesting to lay down "Africa" on the procrustean bed of "Western" experience. In that regard, the critique of Eurocentrism becomes paramount. From the perspective of an African political thinker, identifying useful theoretical and practical tools to make sense of, and analyse African politics is of paramount concern.

My intention in the preceding sections was not to review the literature, which dominates the ways of analysing politics in (Central) Africa. This has already been done elsewhere (Hyden, 1999: 9-27). I want to focus on a few theories and paradigms that can be related to the current trends of politics in Central Africa. First, the theory of state collapse is now as prominent as the "failure of state" theory (Hyden, 1999 : 14-16). The collapse of the states in Africa as analysed by Zartman (1995); also Reno, 1998) refers to the disintegration of authority, to the loss and shrinking of state authority. "Collapsed states" in Central Africa is an expression, which characterises DRC, Angola and so on. Many of the states in central Africa are contested by private or substate groups which are competing for the control of the territory and the monopoly of violence (see the contribution of Patrick Quantin in this volume). Collapsed states are "conflictualised" states. The intense conflict over the state is generally perceived and analysed as a sign of state "pathology" (Joseph, 1998). I think that paradoxically, conflicts in Central Africa reveal the consolidation of the state. I want here to mention the following points.

- Conflicts are made intelligible through the conquest or the safeguard of power; state power is seen by actors in conflict as providing access to subjective and objective resources, as a fundamental instrument for the determination of a collective destiny which mobilises conflictual energies;
- Mapping the itinerary of conflicts shows the importance of cities or towns in which state functions are located; in this regard the occupation of the presidential palace, the state's symbol of power par excellence, marks the ultimate triumph (see the contribution of Sundberg in this volume about the Congo);
- Conflicts do not necessarily imply the end of the nation-state in a Weberian perspective. There is the possibility of envisaging the community of conflicts as referring to interaction based on mutual recognition of actors as revealed by confrontation, negotiation, etc.

Conflicts develop around the state. In some cases, it divides and in other cases it unifies actors and the state. Conflicts are only possible in a system with at least minimal interaction among the parts.

The critique of the theory of state collapse made by Mamdani through the Congolese (DRC) example needs to be reinforced (Mamdani, 1998a: 8; 1998b). In Mamdani's view, the state persists in DRC because the state in the DRC refers to "the constellation of Native Authorities, through which order has been maintained in the Congolese countryside since the colonial period began" (Mamdani, 1998.a: 8)". The role of Native Authorities is important. But it is not historically pertinent to analyse them in isolation from the state. Native Authorities were invented or reinvented in order to be part of the central state's penetration and domination of local societies. It doesn't make sense to proceed as Mamdani does by assigning Native Authorities to "ethnic power" and the "central state" to "civic power". These categories of reference are not separate from each other. In real life, they are in constant interaction. Part of "civic power" is embodied in "ethnic power" when the state invents or canalizes ethnicity. Part of "ethnic power" is in "civic power". In other words, the illusion of dichotomy must be transcended.

State persistence in (Central) Africa can also be analysed by taking seriously the state as a cultural form. The symbolic life of the state, expressed through rituals of state power, political socialisation and nationalism, can be an explanatory variable. The material failure of the state in terms of effective power over its territory and people can be compensated for by a relative symbolic success, which is that the political elite have successfully constructed a mental domain of reference. In that regard, one of the weaknesses of Jackson's analysis of the "negative sovereignty" of African States is the minimisation of institutions and norms that constitute the state in Africa. (Jackson, 1990) The institutionalisation of the system of states should to be taken seriously. There is no sufficient argument from which the effective or material life of the state is to be prioritized over the symbolic and cultural life or vice-versa. Jackson focussed well on the international community as a resource for the existence of African states; but it was done more from the perspective of the pathology of African states than from the objective analysis of the dynamics of the state. Ultimately, the nostalgia for state formation in Western Europe prevailed over scientific analysis. To cite another example, it is clear that, for instance, in Angola and DRC the central authorities had lost control of important parts of their territory. Meanwhile, there are international expectations and pressures for them to act on behalf of those over whom they do not exercise any authority (see the contribution of Patrick Quantin in this volume).

The preceding analyses illustrate the importance of the idea of the state and also its mythology. The idea of the state can sometimes emancipate itself from its appalling material conditions. It is at the same time a fiction which can produce effects of reality. Finally, I submit that the "failure of state theory" (Hyden, 1999: 14-16) is the failure of some visions of the state. State theory can be rehabilitated through an operational and reflexive approach.

Note

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