

revised draft CA comment on Koenraad Stroeken

words to be italicised appear both in *italics and underlined* – the underlining may be removed

Endogenous state formation in Central Africa?

by Wim van Binsbergen

For decades, Prof. Stroeken has entertained a profound and comprehensive fieldwork relationship with a Tanzanian society. This has led to several splendid books (2000, 2010, 2018). On that basis, his recent CA contribution seeks to explain (*cf.* 2018) the local process of state formation by an appeal to endogenous forces peculiar to that context, especially the centrality of healing as a royal attribute.

Such a strategy has been popular among Africanists in recent decades (it is chided in van Binsbergen 2019): given the wrongs which the world has inflicted on Africa and Africans in recent millennia, and to avoid further hegemonic violence, things African must be explained by reference to African conditions, rather than to transcontinental factors.

The idea of endogenous dynamics also finds support from a different angle unaffected by African sensitivities: dominant approaches in archaeology such as Renfrew's Cambridge School abhor the idea of transregional / transcontinental continuities, preferring to explain change from regional conditions – Renfrew has applied such a model to Aegean archaeology (1972) and even designed specific mathematics therefore (Renfrew & Cooke 1979).

In principle, contemplation of endogenous factors is pertinent in state formation. In cultural history worldwide, states have only a shallow history (a handful of millennia, against the ca. 4,000 millennia of human existence). The earliest states (in Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Near East, the Indus Valley, Shang China, Meso America), must have sprung from a constellation of factors among which endogenous ones were probably important; is there a *prima facie* reason why such endogenous factors could not have played a comparable role in sub-Saharan Africa?

Stroeken's appeal to magic and healing is well-taken, in that it reminds us of modalities of conceptualising the state (Cassirer 1961 / 1946; Taussig 1997; Durkheim 1912; Althusser 1970 / 1976; Gramsci 1975; Geschiere 1986) in which not political institutions in the narrower sense – structures of management, representation, extraction, redistribution, oppression, – but *ideological* mechanisms bring subjects to submission to the invisible, transcendent entity that the state invariably amounts to. 'Ideological state apparatuses' including magic and healing largely, and effectively, reinforce the state, for they obscure – from the participants's consciousness – the essential violence at the heart of any state.

Against the mystique of the state it is sobering to point to a number of simple and firm material conditions (also *cf.* Doornbos & van Binsbergen 2017). A state cannot exist *in vacuo*, since it cannot (*cf.* Huxley 1932) reproduce by its own means the humans that fill its institutions and constitute its subjects; hence both conceptually and historically, state formation implies an absolute and defiant departure from 'the kinship order' – *i.e.* from the premises of sociability, kinship, production, and non-violence that inform most pre-state village communities worldwide (van Binsbergen 2001, 2003). Moreover,

for a state to be possible, we need major surplus production to support the – non-productive and exploitative – state apparatus and its personnel. Whether such surplus may be realised, depends on further material and cultural factors:

- *ecology* (African surface soils are the oldest and most depleted in the world, and the rare and ephemeral nature of state formation in sub-Saharan Africa should be seen in this light);
- *modes of production*: hunting and gathering constituted the default mode of production of humanity throughout its long history except since the Neolithic (12 ka BP) rise of food production through agriculture and animal husbandry; there are no indications that before the Neolithic enough surplus production towards state formation was possible
- *storage and transportation*: if a state is to persist over time and to maintain a certain territorial extension, the surplus must be transmittable in space and time – which again points to (post-)Neolithic conditions
- *a logocentric cultural context*: the early states mentioned existed in a cultural environment also characterised by the other elements of the logocentric (Derrida 1967) package: writing, priest-organised religion, and proto-science.

Against this background, the prospects for independent state formation in sub-Saharan Africa on the basis of totally endogenous dynamics look very dim indeed. Yet I cannot deny that the idea is tempting, given the localising pressures (Fardon 1990) in classic anthropology. A fieldworker makes a huge investment in learning local conditions, relationships, language and culture, and wants to get maximum mileage in return. Fieldwork as the paradigmatic strategy towards valid intercultural knowledge implies that, *subjectively*, one's active interpretative horizon is myopically restricted in space and time.

In my own older studies on South Central African state formation (van Binsbergen 1981, 1992, 2012) reliance on endogenous dynamics constituted a perspective that was not even problematised – and that won me praise from the nestor of South Central African historical studies, Vansina (1993) – even though he contested my designation 'states' for the political units emerging in the region after 1500 CE. However, when I spent a year in the Workgroup on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, 1994-1995), my eyes were opened: the oral traditions which I had interpreted (along with my African interlocutors) as recent and local, yet contained numerous scraps of stray (but unmistakable) elements from Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Near East, and South and South East Asia (van Binsbergen 2010). My fieldwork blinkers had prevented me from seeing the long-range, transcontinental picture. The states I had assumed to emerge from a regional dynamics, in fact were predicated on much older prototypes thousands of kms away. In general, it appears that worldwide most states owed their emergence to their region being plugged into the world system of trade especially in gold, cattle, and slaves. Only recently did I find (2019, 2020) concrete indications of Mediterranean, and of South, East and South East Asian inroads into South Central Africa during the Common Era. Not endogenous dynamics but diffusion and stimulus invention (Kroeber 1940) were the factors I had missed.

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Invitation to submit CA comment on MS# 303550

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Dear Professor Binsbergen,

This message is to invite you to submit a 1000-word comment on a paper entitled "Medicine and Kingship: endogenous centralization in east and central Africa," by Koenraad Stroeken. This paper and your comment would be published in the same issue of *Current Anthropology*.

I am including the abstract here so that you may make a more informed decision as to whether you would be able to provide a commentary on this paper:

"Despite a vast and recently reinvigorated body of research, a glaring lacuna remains in the literature on African chief- and kingship. Exogenous socio-structural explanations (Vansina) and the universalist concept of sacred kingship (de Heusch) disregard the endogenous regional process of political centralization. This article proposes a corrected structuralism as a method to detect in cultural processes their endogenous basis, or 'tensor': a syntagm paradigmatically 'stretched' in time and space. Ethnographic fieldwork in east and central Africa reveals that both chieftaincy and status acquisition revolve around medicine, not governance. The tensor of medicine combines two sacrificial practices, divination and initiation, and two gift-oriented practices, magic and association. In terms of this tensor, kingship is a freak development, violating the democratic principle of medicine. Ethnographic comparison confirms that kings split the tensor by privileging the binding logic of gifts at the expense of divination and initiation, which control the chief's power. In contrast, the colonial impact on centralization is a collapsed tensor, banning the mixed political-religious practices of magic and divination in favor of a religiously legitimated political hierarchy. Tensor dynamics bring out pivots of meaning that shake the European default model of the polity."

Please respond to this message indicating your interest in providing a comment on this paper, and we will send you the paper, along with instructions for submitting your comment.

The comment will be due August 19, 2022.

Thank you for considering this request.

Best regards,

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