

## Response to Tobolka's Article on Chieftdom

Petr Skalník

First of all, I feel obliged to Radim Tobolka for his apparently painstaking analysis of some of my publications about the importance of chieftdoms for understanding politics in Africa and elsewhere. I appreciate his fair approach to my findings and assertions. In a way, Tobolka put into an order my somewhat scattered theses. For this I am grateful to him.

It took me some time before I realized that chieftdoms are not only historical phenomena that precede the formation of the state (cf. Fisiy, 1995; van Binsbergen, 2003; Perrot and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2003). Back in 1978, when I first arrived in Bimbilla, the capital of Nanuŋ, in modern nomenclature the Nanumba District of Northern Region of Ghana, I thought that I am to study a sociopolitical relic, an early state which survived from the past because the colonial regimes and modern state of Ghana did not manage to abolish it. Gradually, I realized that it was the modern state that was imposed on African societies as an element of foreign expansion, as part and parcel of European colonialism. Nanuŋ, along with plethora of similar sociopolitical formations, was on the contrary genuinely indigenous that survived despite the efforts of colonial and postcolonial powers to either eradicate or modify it. Polities such as Nanuŋ were not mere survivals but active in the present because they have been both symbols of identity and players in social life of communities. When I stayed in Bimbilla for just few weeks, I had witnessed the weakness of the Ghanaian state whose military leader was overthrown in an intra-army coup, partly because of the breakdown of state-run economy. Even when civilian government was restored in 1979, the malaise of the state did not end, on the contrary. Within two years, in 1981, a new military regime took power and only after a number of years of reforms Ghana got better economically.

In the meantime, Nanuŋ experienced violent ethnic conflict caused indirectly by the weakness of the state. In some of my writings I have analyzed military clashes between the autochthonous Nanumba and the immigrant

Konkomba (Skalník 1986a; 1986b; 1989; 2002; 2003; 2011; 2017a). What was fascinating was that the clashes between various ethnic groups were quite common in Ghana during the civilian rule. However, when military government seized power, these conflicts were much less common. The state was easier capable to suppress them. Nevertheless, even under the civilian rule that held out since 1992, there was no lasting peace in Nanuŋ. The ethnic rivalry between the Konkomba and the Nanumba continued by clashes in 1994 and 1995.

When the Bimbilla Naa, the paramount chief of Nanuŋ from the Banyili line, died in 1999, the alternating succession by the Gbuxumayili line was delayed because of discord between two pretenders. Eventually, through legal litigation, a pretender whose credentials were highly problematic, was enskinned (i.e. installed). After some years, in connection with the funeral of the other pretender, the Bimbilla Naa Andani Dasana was murdered on 19 June 2014. The succession back to Banyili has not been reported until today, ten years since. Is the chiefdom of Nanuŋ bound to die out?

Meanwhile, it is apparent that chiefdom-like polities have formed in various parts of the world, especially among the armed communities such as pirates, drug cartels, liberation movements, political parties, terrorist groups, trade unions, etc. (Chabal et al., 2004; Grinin and Korotayev, 2019; 2023). In effect, these polities compete with established states, whether from inside or outside. The role of chiefs in the democratic Africa was persuasively examined by Baldwin (Baldwin 2016; cf. Skalník 2017b). I have further expanded my thoughts on democratic potential of chiefs and chiefdoms (Skalník 2019; 2020). The thesis about universality of chiefdoms seems to be corroborated (Skalník 2004; 2018).

Tobolka's conclusion that the hybrid relationship between the state and chiefdom, or between power and authority, is unlikely to work may be correct if we consider only the purely conceived relationships. But if we expand the concept of chiefdom into a competitor or alternative to the state, then the hybridity emerges as quite common during the past and present. What I would suggest is to broaden and deepen our future research into the problem of chiefdom.

## References

- Baldwin, Kate. 2016. *The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Binsbergen, Wim van. 2003. Introduction: The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law in Africa and Beyond. Theoretical Perspectives on Chiefs, the State, Agency, Customary Law, and Violence. In *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law. Essays on Africa and beyond*, edited by Wim van Binsbergen. Münster-Hamburg-London: LIT: 9–47.
- Chabal, Patrick, Feinman, Gary, and Skalník, Petr. 2004. Beyond States and Empires: Chiefdoms and Informal Politics. *Social Evolution and History* 3(1): 22–40.
- Fisiy, Cyprian F. 1995. Chieftaincy in the Modern State: An Institution at the Crossroads of Democratic Change. *Paideuma* 41: 49–62.
- Grinin, Leonid E., and Korotayev, Andrey V. 2019. Chiefdoms: From Archaic Polities to Modern Terrorist Organizations. In *Evolution: Evolutionary Trends, Aspect, and Patterns*, edited by Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev. Volgograd: Uchitel Publishing House: 124–133.
- Grinin, Leonid E., and Korotayev, Andrey V. 2023. Chiefdoms: Beyond Time. In *Evolution in Nature, Society, and Cognition*, edited by Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev. Volgograd: Uchitel Publishing House, 66–74.
- Perrot, Claude-Hélène, and Fauvelle-Aymar, François-Xavier (eds). 2003. *Le retour des rois: Les autorités traditionnelles et l'Etat en Afrique contemporaine*. Paris: Karthala.
- Skalník, Petr. 1986a. *The Nanumba-Konkomba War: A Study of Local Politics in Northern Ghana*. An unpublished B.A. (Hons.) dissertation. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Skalník, Petr. 1986b. Nanumba Chieftaincy Facing the Ghanaian State and Konkomba 'Tribesmen': An interpretation of the Nanumba-Konkomba War of 1981. In *State and Local Community in Africa*, edited by W. van Binsbergen, F. Reynjens, and H. Hesselting. Brussels: CEDAF/ASDOC: 89–109.
- Skalník, Petr. 1989. Outwitting Ghana: Pluralism of Political Culture in Nanuŋ. In *Outwitting the State*, edited by Petr Skalník. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers: 145–168.
- Skalník, Petr. 2002. The State and Local Ethnopolitical Identities: The Case of Community Conflicts in Northern Ghana. *Nouveaux Mondes* 10: 141–166.

- Skalník, Petr. 2003. Nanumba versus Konkomba: An Assessment of a Troubled Existence. In *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law. Essays on Africa and Beyond. In Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouwerooy van Nieuwaaal*, edited by Wim van Binsbergen. Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT Verlag: 69–78.
- Skalník, Petr. 2004. Chiefdom: A Universal Political Formation? *Focaal - European Journal of Anthropology* 43: 76–98.
- Skalník, Petr. 2008. Rethinking Chiefdoms. In *Beside the State: Emergent Powers in Contemporary Africa*, edited by Alicia Bellagamba and Georg Klute. Köln: Köppe: 183–192.
- Skalník, Petr. 2011. Chiefdom at War with Chiefless People while the State Looks on. *Social Evolution and History* 10 (1): 55–121.
- Skalník, Petr. 2017a. War in Northern Ghana. Chiefdom of Nanuŋ, Chiefless Konkomba, and the Modern State. In *Chiefdoms Yesterday and Today*, edited by Robert L. Carneiro, Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev. Clinton Corners, N.Y.: Eliot Werner Publications: 257–307.
- Skalník, Petr. 2017b. Review of „Baldwin, Kate. 2016. *The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press. xv+237 p.” *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 5(1): 151–154.
- Skalník, Petr. 2018. Chiefs and Chiefdoms. In *The International Encyclopaedia of Anthropology* edited by Hilary Callan. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons. Article:, vol. 2: 815–820.
- Skalník, Petr. 2019. Succession and Democracy in Nanuŋ, Northern Ghana. *Asian and African Studies* 28(2): 205–222.
- Skalník, Petr. 2020. African Chiefs as Brokers of Democratic Political Culture. *The Journal of Culture* 9 (1): 4–7.

Petr Skalník

[skalnik.petr@gmail.com](mailto:skalnik.petr@gmail.com)

Independent Researcher