

# Chiefdom in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Watchdog of Domesticated Modern State?

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*Abstract: The article examines general issues of state-chiefdom interaction in sub-Saharan Africa. The starting point is the claim by Peter Skalník<sup>1</sup> (2011: 6) and other anthropologists and political scientists that chiefdom is an “omnipresent organisational principle that coexists with the state”<sup>2</sup> and should play a crucial role in the democratisation process. The theoretical basis of this literature is the understanding of authority and power as distinct phenomena with their own dynamics. In the first part, I deduce a general typology of political units along the dimensions of authority/power and centralisation/decentralisation as implicit in Skalník’s texts. In the second part, I examine the normative side of Skalník’s thesis, which sees the link between chiefdom and the modern state as a solution to long-standing governance problems in this part of the world.*

Keywords: Chiefdom; sub-Saharan Africa; modern state

## Introduction<sup>3</sup>

Skalník and other social scientists reject the (neo)evolutionist view that chiefdom necessarily leads to the state (Chabal, Feinman, and Skalník, 2004: 27; Skalník, 2004: 78; 2011: 159). The reason is not, as it might seem at first glance, the inability of the chiefdom to increase its complexity and create specialised institutions such as tax collection, the military, the police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the government (Skalník, 2002: 6). The reason is that these centralised political units operate on different logics, the chiefdom on the logic of authority and the state on the logic of power (Skalník, 2004: 84; 2006: 496).

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Czech into English were performed by the author.

<sup>3</sup> All sources obtained from the Internet have been saved by the author in pdf format and are available upon request in the author's archive.

Since its origins in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, a “Westphalian” sovereign, territorial state has spread over all continents and has become the dominant form, at least nominally (Badie, 2000, cf. Chabal et al., 2004: 28–30). Their different foundations, however, also mean that chiefdom and the state can, at least in principle, coexist side by side (Skalník, 2006: 498; 2011: 160).

In this article, I analyse the thesis, put forward in its most radical form by the Czech political anthropologist Petr Skalník (1996; 2002; 2004; 2006), according to which the prerequisite for successful political development in sub-Saharan Africa is the “reconciliation” of the chiefdom and the state: “the modern state needs the chiefdom as its equal partner” (Skalník, 2006: 502). In the first part of the text, I examine whether a meaningful typology of political units can be constructed based on the notion of authority and power as two distinct principles with their own internal dynamics. In the second part, I assess the normative side of the thesis, i.e. the alleged desirability of coexistence of chieftaincy and the modern state, in the context of empirical research on so-called traditional authorities.

### **Authority and power**

Skalník (2004) convincingly demonstrates that the terminology used so far for African political formations has been inconsistent. The literature refers to these political units by every conceivable term from state, early state, segmentary state to kingdom, chiefdom, monarchy to empire and civilisation, etc. In some cases, authors are reluctant to categorise the units and write about government, leadership, political organisation, political system, or political institutions. There are several reasons for this terminological chaos. First, different authors have different understandings of social evolution. Some assume unilinear evolution, others multilinear, some expect an inevitable evolution towards greater complexity, and others do not (cf. Grinin and Korotayev, 2011: 277). Second, there is no consensus on the extent to which the political sphere is autonomous. Hence, there are different approaches to the interrelation of politics, religion, and ritual: for example, the king can be seen as a ruler or as a fetish with varying degrees of ability to enforce his decisions. Third, scholars have used different definitions of authority and power and have imagined their relationship differently.

According to Skalník (1999: 162), authority and power are distinct, “mutually exclusive ‘ideal types’ of arrangements of public affairs”. Scruton

(2007: 48) agrees with the general distinction between authority and power: “In all cases authority must be distinguished from power”. Philp (2004: 51), on the other hand, argues that authority is a “distinct subset of power” (cf. Skalník, 1999: 161). Overall, the distinction between authority and power is common in political science but not in the construction of typologies of political units. Friedman (1991: 28–31) suggests why it is so when he argues that social sciences are dominated by Max Weber’s broad conception, where authority is understood “as a universal phenomenon, coextensive with organised society and encompassing radically different types of relationships”, i.e. charismatic, traditional, and legally rational systems of government. In contrast, Skalník understands authority in a narrower sense, in Friedman’s (1991: 28–31) words, as “a special communicative relationship between a speaker, his utterance, a listener, and his response”. According to Skalník (1999: 162), the key characteristic of authority is not legitimacy but that it is “voluntarily recognised by all people”. Acting on the impulse of authority implies a specific psychological moment: one does not critically examine why, for what reasons, one should comply with the person/institution in question or does so only up to a certain point (Green 1998; Philp 2004). And as elaborated by Popitz (2017:79), “authority bonds are based on the aspiration to obtain recognition from others ... it is via this component, our own aspiration to recognition, both from others and from ourselves, that we engender the effects of authority in the first place and produce boundedness to persons in authority”. Note that such a conception of authority presupposes a specific relationship between the political sphere on the one hand and religion, identity, and individual autonomy on the other.

### **Typology of political units**

As a first step, I attempt to construct a general typology of political units using the authority/power dimension. If such a typology turns out to be meaningful, it is the first indication that Skalník’s thesis cannot be taken lightly. Although Skalník does not explicitly offer such typology in his articles, the reader can infer one. The second dimension of this typology places a divide between decentralised and centralised formations. Decentralised are, or were in the past, hunter-gatherer groups (acephalous, corporatist, etc.) and segmentary societies (based on descent or kinship) (Skalník, 2011: 154–156). The centralised ones are big-men societies, chieftdoms, and states (Chabal et al., 2004: 26–27; Skalník,

2011: 156–160). In big-men societies and chiefdoms, the leader's authority is decisive and is achieved in the case of the big man and hereditary in the case of the chief (Chabal et al., 2004: 26–27). The state, in contrast, is characterised by the logic of power and the “monopoly on the use of physical coercion or the threat thereof” (Skalník, 2006: 496).

Obviously, the dimensions of authority/power and centralisation /decentralisation alone are not sufficient for a general typology. The third dimension must be either the number of persons or the degree of socio-cultural complexity, i.e. the ability of a society to create specialised roles and institutions. Which of the two we choose is not important for the purposes of this paper. The two measures overlap to some extent as increasing numbers of persons are often associated with a higher level of socio-cultural complexity, especially for centralised units. If we choose the number of persons, then a small-sized polity will comprise dozens to hundreds of persons, a medium-sized polity thousands to tens of thousands, and a large polity tens of thousands of persons or more. For each of the three sizes, using the dimensions of authority/power and centralisation/decentralisation, there should be four basic variants of political organisation. In the text, I do not systematically address the question of historical transformations of one type into another and the possibility of oscillations between centralised and decentralised arrangements (e.g. the Burmese Kachins and Shans described by Edmund Leach in the 1950s). In terms of territorial control, there can be a number of different arrangements, of which exclusive control of a well-defined territory by a single political entity is only one of many possibilities (and historically less common). In my description below, I proceed in an “anti-evolutionary” direction, i.e., starting with large political formations and subsequently moving towards smaller ones.

## **Large political units**

A centralised political formation structured on the basis of authority would be difficult to find because of the high number of members (Table 1). The authority of a leader would not be able to maintain a unified political order in such a large population. However, decentralised political units of this scale have functioned throughout history and still function to some extent as so-called segmentary states. And a large centralised, power-dominated unit is, of course, the modern state or any dictatorship, despotic or totalitarian state, etc. In a decentralised

form this arrangement exists as a confederation, for example contemporary Switzerland.

Table 1

## Large political units

	Organised on the basis of authority	Power-based
Centralised	Not viable (authority alone cannot sustain a unified political order of such scale)	Modern states, dictatorships, autocracies, despots...
Decentralised	Segmentary states	Confederations

Source: author

**Medium-sized political units**

In the category of medium-sized political formations, all four variants can be historically documented (Table 2). The centralised unit in which the political order derives from the leader's authority is the chieftdom. Geographical, demographic, and cultural conditions were very suitable for the emergence of chieftdoms in sub-Saharan Africa (Herbst, 2000; see also Goody, 1971). Low population density, the abundance of land, the way it was cultivated (low productivity without ploughs and irrigation structures) and other factors meant that political power was not necessarily territorial; moreover, ownership and use of territory were separate concepts. It was easier to resettle than to risk the consequences of a direct conflict, which was primarily aimed at capturing captives/slaves, as property rights over people played a more significant role than rights over territory. However, with distance from the centre, the authority of the chief waned and gradually merged into or overlapped with other similar polities. Borders, in the current sense of the word, did not exist, and outsiders moved through the space without much restraint. As far as decentralised units of this type are concerned, segmentary societies are well described, especially in the North African and Middle Eastern region, but also in West and East Africa (Middleton and Tait 1958).

Table 2: Medium-sized political units

	Organised on the basis of authority	Power-based
Centralised	Chiefdom	Mini-despots
Decentralised	Segmentary society	Groupings of mini-despots respecting one central authority (political, religious, ritual, etc.)

Source: author

Rather than for the period immediately preceding colonisation, the general political-geographical framework à la Herbst seems to be valid for sub-Saharan Africa until about the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As Reid (2009: 17) puts it, “[l]ong-distance and overseas trade changed the very nature of society and polity, presenting opportunities for the accumulation of wealth which did not necessarily exist in rather simpler agricultural systems of local production and exchange”. Reid (2009: 17–28) is referring here primarily to the slave trade, which had already been common in parts of the continent before the arrival of Europeans. The growth and internationalisation of this trade from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries changed the political organisation towards centralisation, hierarchisation, and militarism (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2023; Nwokeji, 2011). This change was followed by the indirect mode of colonial rule from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. For medium-sized, power-dominated political formations, I choose the term mini-despots in the proposed typology.

“When the French undertook the occupation of West Africa, they were confronted with a number of native tyrants who cruelly exploited their subjects. Life and property were insecure; slavery and human sacrifice prevailed in many areas” (Buell cited in Ribot, 2002: 70). As Ribot (2002: 70) notes, these statements should be treated with caution, as they were (mostly?) self-deception by the colonisers in an attempt to justify their “‘civilising’ mission”. Centralised, power-dominated political formations were more understandable to Europeans because they better conformed to their ideas of what political life should be like. Therefore, they tended to see this arrangement even where it was not. Chiefdoms and mini-despotisms undoubtedly coexisted. The frequency of mini-despots increased towards the coast, but many also operated inland. In some cases, groupings of such mini-despots respected a single central authority

- political, religious, ritual, or otherwise - and thus emerged as power-organised but, on the whole, decentralised formations.

### Small political units

In the case of small political units, we can exclude a small power-dominated decentralised society from the theoretical four variants because it does not make sense at this scale (Table 3). A power-dominated centralised unit can be described as a rather transient, unstable political formation, since at such a small size it would either break up on its own (people would, in lay terms, vote with their feet), tend to succumb to centralisation pressures from the others, or, on the contrary, dominate weaker competitors and grow to medium size. The other two options, however, are well described: independent, centralised village-size political units controlled by a leader (or leaders) with the authority of whatever origin and decentralised hunter-gatherer bands.

Table 3

Small political units

	Organised on the basis of authority	Power-based
Centralised	Villages organised based on the leader(s)' authority	Short-term formations with a tendency to break up or grow to medium size
Decentralised	Hunter-gatherer groups	Logically impossible

Source: author

### Chieftdom and kingdom

The aforementioned overview shows that distinguishing between authority and power as two distinct organising principles allows for a meaningful universal typology, which is interesting from the perspective of social evolution because it offers a direct line of political development from mini-despotism to the state, for example. To better define my topic, let us now examine more closely chieftdom in relation to another mid-size or large political formation, the kingdom.

In the proposed typology, chieftdom is a centralised political unit ruled via authority, i.e. “[i]t is generally assumed that chiefs do not have the legitimate right to enforce decisions” (Claessen, 2011: 6). Chabal et al. (2004: 24) further specify that the internal organisation of chieftdoms derives from face-to-face interaction, along informal lines, and may or may not be hierarchical. Chieftdoms are characterised by consensual politics and tend to be smaller than the state. “Chieftaincy in its classical form is endowed with ritualistic, often sacred, characteristics. It is an institution of wisdom and tradition, indeed of authority, not of executive government and administration” (Skalník, 2006: 503). As one would expect, different authors place emphasis on different characteristics of chieftdoms. For example, Grinin and Korotayev (2011:283–284) explicitly mention the “formation and institutionalisation of new forms of social inequality” and the decline in the importance of face-to-face interaction: “in such societies the demographic scale is beyond (and often even far beyond) the one which can be organised by personal relationships in face-to-face interaction”. Succession is another topic that is often discussed. Most authors consider the position of a chief to be an ascribed position that is inherited (Chabal et al., 2004: 26; Claessen, 2011: 5–7; cf. Grinin and Korotayev, 2011: 307). But as Skalník (2006: 497) notes, even seemingly hereditary succession can provide “ritual specialists from among the common subjects with opportunities to influence the process of selecting a new hereditary leader”. Despite the wide range of chieftdom variants, it can be said that there is largely a consensus about its main features.

Skalník (2004) attempts to clarify the relationship between chieftdom and kingship. We usually speak of kingship, where the sacred characteristics of the leader are reinforced in a specific way. In other words, in a kingdom the political-religious power of the leader has a ritualistic essence (de Heusch, 2005: 25). In opposition to this conception is Claessen (2005: 233–234), who considers the king<sup>4</sup> as a ruler in the first place. He is distinguished from the chief by his legitimate power to enforce his decisions and from the president by the fact that it is a hereditary position. The mainstream literature, however, supports the first approach. For example, Scubla (2005: 40) writes that the king does not rule but reigns, which means to guarantee “the order of the world and of the society by observing ritual prescriptions” (see also Quigley, 2005: 1). In modern states aka kingdoms, only the last vestiges of this symbolic order survive from the

<sup>4</sup> For a more fluent reading, I write about kings but the same obviously applies if the king is a woman (i.e. queen).



past. From a comparative perspective, the kingdom is a universal phenomenon that has nothing to do with the emergence of the state. Probably influenced by these works, Skalník (2004: 79) attempts to redefine kingship as a specific type of chiefdom. However, why the institution of kingship should be tied only to chiefdom is not clear. While the king is not primarily a ruler, this does not mean that a society where the institution of kingship is established must operate solely on the principle of authority. A terminological solution is offered by the dimensions of centralisation/decentralisation in the presented typology. A centralised kingdom is then indeed identical to a chiefdom or a variant thereof. However, a decentralised formation where a group of mini-despots respects a single (royal) political-religious-ritual authority can equally be called a kingdom (Table 2).

### **Chiefdom and democracy**

Skalník's primary goal is not to create a typology of political formations. The schema is submerged in his texts as an implicit structure and I only bring it to the surface. For Skalník, understanding authority and power as distinct organising principles serves as a springboard for a normative thesis about the desirability of a certain kind of political organisation in sub-Saharan Africa (Chabal et al., 2004; Skalník, 1996; 2002; 2004; 2006; cf. von Trotha, 1996). Chiefdom was, until recently, the dominant political formation in this geographical space. The remarkable and continuing resilience of chieftaincy to a variety of pressures, its adaptability and ability to represent or replace the state under certain circumstances suggest that it remains a viable institution. Since the implanted modern state remains in many cases a caricature of responsible governance, the power of the state should be corrected by the authority of the chieftaincy.

What Skalník (2006: 503) has in mind in practice is a dual mode of governance where "the executive power of elected representatives is in balance with the authority of hereditary chieftaincy principles". In his article "Chiefdom: A Universal Political Formation?" Skalník introduces the concept of a "New Indirect Rule" (2004:76) and refers to Gellner's (1998) book *Language and Solitude* where Gellner (1998: 142–143) delves into the political views of Bronislaw Malinowski and concludes that – for Malinowski – "the charms" of Indirect Rule consisted in that it "limits the political power of local rulers" while encouraging, fostering, and sustaining "the cultural expression of the

indigenous society, including its political hierarchy". For Gellner (and Malinowski), the model is the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Skalník (2004: 87) further elaborates that chieftdoms should not enter a competition with political parties but function as a safeguard and guarantee of democracy: "[b]y virtue of their smaller size, chieftdoms are often more democratic than states because they allow subjects easier access to their chiefs" (Skalník 2006: 497).

## Historical trajectories of chieftdoms

As I have noted above, the political order in sub-Saharan Africa has always changed and evolved as society itself has changed and evolved, including the pre-colonial period. Colonial powers controlled the population through chiefs, whom they, however, remade in their own image as institutions of power (Paine, 2014: 15–17; Posner, 2005: 13–18; Ribot, 2002: 67–70; Ubink, 2008). The colonisers bolstered chiefs' powers or granted them powers that the "chiefs" had not originally had at all. Colonial governments interfered in chiefs' selection from within the circle of "authorised" persons to the extent that somebody completely different could become one. In acephalous societies, colonisers created chiefs *de novo*. There were, of course, differences in how these issues were handled by France and Britain. For example, chiefs in French colonies functioned more like civil servants, while in British colonies, they retained greater autonomy. As van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal (1996: 41) summarises it, "[c]hieftaincy became part of a unifying political and administrative structure. This structure, set up by the colonial rulers, transformed African chieftaincy radically and is still the basis of contemporary African chiefship".

In the 1960s and the 70s, rulers of the newly independent African states regarded chiefs as a historical relic or as collaborators of the colonial powers. They tended to centralise their countries considerably and reduce all self-governing elements: "post-colonial regimes have usually tried to reduce ... chiefs' formal administrative and legal power" (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996: 42). In the period up to the late 1980s, chiefs were forced to take a back seat and in some countries their leadership position was formally abolished (Kyed and Buur, 2007: 1; Paine, 2014: 16; Ubink, 2008: 10–12).

The renaissance of the chieftaincy as a "traditional" institution with real powers began in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the context of changes in the economy and political liberalisation following the collapse of the Soviet-led

Eastern Bloc. A number of sub-Saharan states, such as Mozambique, Ghana, South Africa and others, formalised and strengthened the position of chiefs. Chieftaincy activities include the management of natural resources (especially communal land), dispute resolution (customary courts), the role of mediators between the population and the government, protection of “traditional” cultural and religious values, and the authorisation and arrangement of ‘development projects’ involving third parties (especially international and transnational NGOs funded from abroad). Only in a minority of sub-Saharan countries, such as Namibia and Uganda, did the powers of chiefs remain very limited (Kyed and Buur, 2007: 2–12; Ubink, 2008:13–15).

Skalník (2004: 83, 87) refers to chieftdom in its “classical form” as an institution of “wisdom and tradition, indeed of authority, not of executive government and administration”, a “genuine, authentic, original” product of “African genius”, and hesitates to describe chieftdom as a political institution in the ordinary sense at all, since – “[i]n European eyes” – it integrates many other dimensions: ritual, religious, supernatural, economic, kinship, etc. (Skalník, 1996: 111). At the same time, one must not forget that what we call chieftdom today is the result of past and present transformations as outlined above: “In Africa, chieftaincy is a dynamic institution with pre-colonial roots in some cases, and largely colonial and post-colonial origins in others” (Nyamnjoh n.d., 2004: 2). One is thus faced with a situation where there are a multitude of region-specific forms and discontinuities as well as continuities.

### **Hybridity, multiplicity, marginalisation**

Skalník (2004: 87; 2006: 503–504) specifies the desired role of chieftaincy in politics as follows:

- It should be part of the legislative and legal order.
- It is destined to play a watchdog role, to have a monitoring and control role, to oversee.
- It should control the executive power of the (domesticated)<sup>5</sup> modern state and elected politicians to stand above the executive pillar of power.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “domesticated” loosely after Nyamnjoh (n.d.) to emphasize the inevitable adaptation of the modern state to local conditions.

- Decisions of chiefs and their councils at all levels should be binding on the entire community under their jurisdiction.

In this sense, the chieftaincy resembles, using current European terminology, a combination of a supreme audit office, an ombudsman, and a local legislature. Let us examine this idea in greater detail. If we accept the proposition that chieftdom and the state are two different sets of “rules of the game” which, as distinct principles of political organisation, have their own sources of legitimacy, their long-term interaction may take different directions. In my view, these processes are best described by van Binsbergen (2003: 27–33). I complement his model with the perspective of Goodfellow and Lindemann (2013: 5–9). In general, there are three possible lines of development: hybridity, multiplicity, and marginalisation.

Hybridity is a condition where the state and the chieftdom complement and reinforce each other, where both institutions flourish and expand their scope at the expense of “various other sources of economic, media, religious, domestic, parental, etc. power in society” (van Binsbergen, 2003: 32).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, there is a significant blending of the two sets of rules without losing their distinctiveness. Of course, both sides have to adapt, to make concessions in terms of their values and practices; they cease to exist in their original “pure” form. Perhaps the best contemporary example is the integration of liberal representative democracy and chieftaincy in South Africa (Goodfellow and Lindemann, 2013: 6).

Multiplicity refers to a situation in which the state and the chieftdom keep their own sphere of influence, respecting each other’s domain, i.e. they function largely side by side. If the two institutions begin to compete for control over a domain of social life or a scarce resource, conflict arises. Goodfellow and Lindemann (2013) refer to the post-colonial history of the Buganda kingdom as an example of multiplicity.

The third possibility is a marginalisation of one of the institutions or a dramatic reduction of its sphere of influence, which can occur in various ways. The state may lose legitimacy through dysfunction or brutality, and the chieftaincy fills its place. Conversely, the state can expand its legitimacy at the expense of the chieftdom “through education and intensive participation [of the population] in such formal organisations as schools, hospitals, state courts,

<sup>6</sup> In Skalník’s terminology, we would not speak of “power” but of factors that influence the organization of the public sphere, for example.

churches, and enterprises" (van Binsbergen, 2003: 30). In other words, the state can gradually convince the population of its usefulness and gain legitimate dominance over chieftdom, as has happened, for example, in Europe. By contrast, in sub-Saharan Africa, co-optation of the political-religious elite of the chiefs into state structures is more common. While this development results in a degree of hybridity, chieftdom finds itself under the tutelage of the state overall.

In the light of the hybridity-multiplicity-marginalisation model, Skalník's thesis belongs to the hybrid order. At the same time, it is clear that Skalník imagines a deeper integration of chieftaincy and state than it exists in South Africa today.

## **Discussion**

Following my description of the theoretical foundations of the article and the essence of the proposed solution, I now proceed to a critical evaluation of it. What general objections can be raised against creating a balanced hybrid model? What empirical findings about contemporary chieftdoms speak in favour of Skalník's thesis?

Objection 1: Citizens who have embraced liberal representative democracy may perceive chiefs as illegitimate and incapable of performing tasks that would lead to public good (Mamdani, 1996; Ribot, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, a brief illustration will suffice. Although chieftaincy elites and their councils may play a role in events and decisions affecting the whole country, their main playing field is at the local level (Logan, 2009: 107). Since chiefs have long been involved in local politics, whether officially or unofficially, this is also where most of empirical findings come from. In his detailed analysis of African attempts at decentralisation, mostly unsuccessful or merely rhetorical, Ribot (2002: 21) aptly summarises the first objection: "(i) that chiefs are not necessarily representative, legitimate or even liked by local populations; (ii) that they are often constructions of the central state and at times, even today, are administrative auxiliaries of central authorities; (iii) that they are not necessarily accountable to the local population; and (iv) that empowering or working with them may not serve the efficiency, equity or development aims so often forwarded by decentralisation advocates". Ribot (2002: 22) concludes that

“customary authorities pose a threat to the development of local democratic government and to effective decentralisation”.<sup>7</sup>

Objection 2: Who is willing and able to promote and implement a balanced hybrid system? Is such a course of social change even realistic? Although the African National Congress government in South Africa found oneself in a historically unique position, it did not undertake a major hybridisation anyway and Skalník does not bring up South Africa as an example either. The demand for hybridisation can hardly come from political elites in other sub-Saharan countries. Similarly, the “traditional” authorities, by their very nature local structures, are neither willing nor ready to organise a national campaign along these lines, and without their leadership, the citizens/subjects cannot push for such change. The last group that could play a significant role, the national intellectual elite, is almost unanimously on the side of liberal representative democracy and would not support what it often sees as dubious and outdated indigenous institutions.

Objection 3: Chiefs keep creatively reshaping the cultural reservoir entrusted to them, often in directions that move the institution away from, rather than closer to, Skalník’s (2004: 87) “classical form”. The chiefs can be seen as a politico-religious patriarchal elite who artfully manipulate the dichotomies of traditional/modern and local/global to expand their sphere of influence in public affairs but who also, in parallel, pursue personal goals: prestige, wealth, security, sexual gratification, etc. (cf. van Binsbergen 2003: 28). Under these circumstances, the question arises to what extent feedback from chiefs’ subjects, that perhaps functioned in the past, can ensure long-term accountability of the chiefly elite to the community in the present. An example is the involvement of chiefs in financial flows from abroad through third parties, i.e. various non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations (cf. Paine 2014: 33–34).

Notwithstanding these caveats, qualitative and quantitative research provides evidence of the viability of the hybrid system. For example, data from the

<sup>7</sup> There are strong counter-arguments to these conclusions. First, the performance of sub-Saharan state institutions at the local level has generally been very poor, so it is not clear what functional structures are supposed to replace the chieftaincy. Second, unlike many members of the national intellectual elite, ordinary citizens see no contradictions in a hybrid system where both elected representatives and traditional authorities co-exist (Logan, 2009: 103–104).

Afrobarometer project, which conducts repeated opinion polls in dozens of African countries, confirm that support for traditional authorities remains high on average, although it is accompanied by considerable variation between and within countries.<sup>8</sup> For example, when asked: “Do you think the influence of traditional leaders in local governance should be strengthened, remain the same, or decrease?” as many as 58% of respondents answered that the influence of chiefs should be increased, and only 8% would reduce it. Positive responses ranged from 21-35% (Madagascar, South Africa, Tanzania) to 76-79% (Lesotho, Botswana, Mali) (Logan 2013: 364–365). These results suggest that the sources of legitimacy of the state and chiefdoms are indeed different and that the persistent support for chiefs in the population is not primarily related to their performance in governance but to what they symbolise (Logan 2013: 372–376; Williams 2009:17–30). According to these findings, chiefdoms have continued to play a significant role in the community primarily as an anchor of cultural identity in a never-ending chain of dramatic social change.

<sup>8</sup> The fourth round of the Afrobarometer from 2008–2009 included a module on traditional authorities. A total of 26,000 respondents from 19 countries participated in standardized interviews (Logan, 2013: 359).

## Conclusion

Chieftdoms have existed for thousands of years and will do so. The politico-religious chiefly elite retains its legitimacy, actively works with it, and is constantly evolving. Skalník seeks to reconcile chieftdom as an indigenous, autochthonous political institution and the modern state as a foreign import. However, the indigeneity of today's chieftdoms is doubtful. At the same time, the typology of political units I am offering, plus empirical findings, show that authority and power can be conceived as distinct organising principles of political life to which different kinds of legitimacy correspond. Skalník's conceptualisation of authority is also consistent with chieftdom as an integral part of the identity of sub-Saharan societies.

By its very nature, the normative aspect of Skalník's thesis cannot be empirically refuted. However, I see no reason why a truly hybrid system, brought about thanks to / founded on a broader social consensus, could not work. Accountability of the leaders to the community can be ensured through a number of mechanisms other than liberal representative democracy. Whether political leaders act from a position of authority in Skalník's sense or, conversely, from a position of power does not in itself guarantee anything. It all depends on whether their actions are directed towards the promotion of the common good and not just the personal one. From this point of view, the authority of the chieftaincy is not inherently better or worse than the power of the state.

The social-scientific literature shows that the domesticated modern state and the chieftaincy can interact to create politics of hybridity, multiplicity, or marginalisation. Skalník's thesis on the need for a "new indirect rule" is too general to capture these nuances. In countries where modern political institutions function well, the legitimacy of the chieftdom is weakened for a variety of reasons, and local mechanisms of accountability are dysfunctional, a hybrid system is not appropriate. Conversely, where the chieftdom has retained public approval and respect and, simultaneously, state institutions are in decay, hybridity may be a way out. However, for reasons I have outlined above (i.e. primarily the absence of a sufficiently strong interest group or a social movement favouring it), I believe that the chances of a hybrid system being put into practice in any country in sub-Saharan Africa are close to zero.



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