

Introduction

The Politics of Local Communities and the State in Africa

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Introduction

After over two decades of political and economic reforms in many countries in Africa, the interactions between African states and subnational actors at the local level have been transformed in fundamental ways. Many important dimensions of politics take place outside of the formal state institutions in the capital city. Given the prevalence of weak central states, subnational politics is hence crucial to understanding a range of important outcomes, including democracy, civil society, ethnic conflict, and economic development. The relationship between African states and local communities is thus especially relevant for contemporary Africanist scholarship. Despite the significance of these on-the-ground politics, mainstream debates about African state–society relations have focused largely on the variation in more formal institutions at the national level. This special issue shows how many important dimensions of politics can be understood by examining the interactions between the state and local communities and the nuanced variations in subnational politics. Moreover, the special issue highlights how scholars are gaining analytic leverage in this emerging research area by taking a multidisciplinary approach and employing a variety of methodological tools.

On-the-ground patterns of conflict and cooperation over political power, economic development, and land or other natural resources in contemporary African societies point to the ongoing salience of public authority that resides outside formal institutions and central governments.¹ Sometimes authority is exercised through neo-traditional customary institutions and local community actors.² At other times, international donors and non-state transnational corporations and NGOs blur the boundaries between the public and private.³ International and local NGOs and community-based organizations have become especially significant for service delivery, the provision of security, and political representation in decision-making.⁴ However, externally driven community-based interventions may be less effective.⁵

Indeed, there is a wide variation in patterns of interactions between local communities, political regimes, state institutions, and markets in Africa. Moreover, these dynamics are not a universal or simple linear march toward liberal democracy, good governance, and the free market. Instead, in Africa, many political regimes have vacillated between democracy and authoritarianism; central state administrations have been decentralized and often recentralized; and, markets have been reorganized and then reconstructed in a response to pressures for policy reform as well as new sources of investment.⁶

The six papers presented in this special issue respond to concerns raised at the American Political Science Association's Africa Workshop 2012 on "Local Communities and the State in Africa" that took place at the University of Botswana in Gaborone, Botswana.⁷ Twenty-two

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v15/v15i1a1.pdf>

scholars teaching at different African universities and four US-based doctoral students attended the workshop. The group was diverse, with participants originating from fourteen different countries, having pursued degrees in thirteen countries, and specializing in seventeen different disciplines/research areas. Workshop participants also were at a variety of stages of their careers and have attained many different ranks: from early graduate students to full professors. In addition, the workshop had five co-leaders, who facilitated the discussion on the politics of local communities and the state.⁸ During an intensive two week period in July 2012, workshop participants debated several key theoretical and methodological questions and then worked to apply these new insights to our respective writing projects.

This special issue showcases a subset of papers that seek to expand our collective understanding of subnational politics. Our work is motivated by several questions. We begin by asking what are these new emerging local institutions and organizations that are vying for public authority? And, how does the role of these new local institutions shape the structure of state power and legitimacy in Africa? We then shift the lens to ask how are Africans participating as citizens and/or subjects even as the political arena is contested and reshaped at the local level? And, finally, how do interactions between local communities and the state involve local but also significantly other national, regional, and transnational actors and linkages?

Local Communities and the African State: Diverse Perspectives and Subnational Variation

As a whole, the papers in this special issue demonstrate the need to systematically examine subnational politics in the context of very different types of political regimes and levels of state capacity – political regimes and state capacity that run the gamut from South Africa to Zimbabwe. All of these papers highlight the existence of significant subnational variation from party politics to service provision, from natural resource management to discourses on culture and tradition. Our collection of papers also reveals the utility of incorporating multiple perspectives in a variety of contexts on any particular issue. The value of diverse points of view is particularly evident when one reads the two different authors focused on politics in Ghana, or the two others investigating processes of decentralization in Botswana and South Africa.

The Provision of Public Goods at the Local Level

For many local communities in Africa, the concrete experience of these complex and varied histories of state formation involves whether and how public goods are provided at the local level. During decades of authoritarian rule and economic stagnation, local communities played a significant role in the day-to-day survival of ordinary Africans.⁹ Beginning in the 1980s, many African states adopted structural adjustment programs that reduced the central state's role in the provision of public goods.¹⁰ With the spread of democratization and decentralization initiatives in the 1990s, African states faced growing popular demands for enhanced delivery of public goods and services in security, health, and education. Would fuller democratic regimes be more responsive to the claims made by African citizens for greater accessibility and higher quality service provision?

Kirk Harris's paper "Bread and Freedom: Linking Democracy and Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa" responds to this question by examining some of the taken-for-granted

assumptions about the relationship between democracy and food security in Africa. Taking Sen's assertion that no democracy experiences famine as a theoretical starting point, Harris attempts to unpack the concept of democracy to explore the likely causal mechanisms of this potential relationship in thirty-eight African countries. On the one hand, he finds that competition through democratic elections is not influential in shaping food security in sub-Saharan Africa. On the other, his analysis reveals a positive relationship between civil liberties, or the freedom to make one's voice heard, and food security. Harris's analysis supports rights-based approaches that highlight the capacity of the most vulnerable groups in society to be able to make effective demands and participate in the political process as the key driver of food security outcomes. Thus, instead of elections, the everyday freedoms that allow vulnerable groups to participate in the policy process are a more robust explanation of food security outcomes in Africa's hybrid democracies.

The paper by Harris points to a major gap in the literature and debates about democracy that tend to rely on national-level aggregate measures of democracy without accounting for significant subnational variation. He sees the need for a research agenda that "shifts the level of analysis" from the level of the state to that of the community. MacLean's paper, discussed in the next subsection, further investigates this subnational variation as well as the mechanisms for democratic participation within several regions and then among two case study villages in Ghana.

In addition to the nature of the political regime, another important factor of public goods provision is the capacity of the state as well as the proliferation of new non-state providers. In weak African states governed by neopatrimonial patronage networks, there is a constant tug-of-war between local authorities and central patrons. Due to ensuing uncertainty, African citizens frequently "exit" and rely on community-level associations to access resources. As Innocent Chirisa notes in "Housing Cooperatives and the Politics of Local Organization and Representation in Peri-Urban Harare, Zimbabwe," low-income residents in peri-urban areas outside of Harare, for example, rely on local housing community-based cooperatives and consortia in order to increase their land security. Since the City of Harare (the responsible government agency) is unable or unwilling to incorporate peri-urban areas within its jurisdiction to service them with the basic amenities of water, sewage, and electricity, new cooperatives have emerged and devised various strategies for survival. In the absence of security of land tenure, and with no access to public services, in some cooperatives local politicians act as guarantors for residents' continuity of stay on their pieces of land. In other instances, local membership in cooperatives and consortia is a way for the urban poor to enhance their "sense of security in a place." These practices of collective action are a form of associational life, which not only shape political identities but also constitute alternative avenues of representation, themes that are explored in more detail below.

The Politics of State Formation: Partial Decentralization and Administrative Reform

Historically, African rulers have differentially integrated local communities into state-building processes. In contrast to Herbst (2000) who makes a more general argument about the inability of African states to project state power into the rural hinterlands, these papers build on Boone (2003) to examine variation in state building over time and at the subnational level.

Parakh Hoon, in “Elephants are Like our Diamonds: Recentralizing Community Based Natural Resource Management in Botswana, 1996-2012,” also examines the patterns of state building in Botswana, but in a different arena of interactions between the state and local communities. Hoon’s paper suggests that in Botswana between the 1990s and 2012, there are two patterns evident in the relationship between the state and local communities in the context of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). In the mid-1990s, the central state gave certain powers to local elites in order to harness their cooperation for CBNRM local institutions. This was not power-sharing, but a mechanism to exert control. Hoon finds that the endogenous state formation of the Botswana state, which had entailed continuity between the pre-colonial and post-colonial dominant elite coalition, and the cooptation of local customary elites by the central state, has meant that, since independence, the central state has governed from the center rather than build local entities or networks of state outposts in rural areas. Hoon’s paper identifies various strategies that are used by the Botswana central state to co-opt subnational actors under the veneer of nation-building and national identity. In the national debate over CBNRM policy, by comparing diamonds for national development with the benefits from elephants and wildlife in general, the CBNRM policy rejected the foundational logic and rationale for a community-based approach. This was an approach which implied that for elephants and wildlife in general to survive in the long term those who face the costs of living in close proximity to wildlife should receive a major share of benefits.

Majuta Mamogale’s paper “Financial Performance of Local Government in Limpopo Province” reveals “twilight practices” at the local level, where the formal processes of administrative decentralization are co-opted by informal but ritualized local practices, which compromise state efforts.¹¹ In South Africa, the Limpopo local government receives the highest percentage of unsatisfactory audit reports, which suggests poor financial performance as compared to municipalities in other provinces in South Africa. Mamogale’s paper explains how cadre deployment in South Africa accounts for these variations in financial management and performance of municipalities. Cadre deployment is not a formal policy of the state, but an informal system of patronage where party loyalists of the ruling African National Congress are recruited into municipal governing structures, sometimes without the requisite skills or competencies. Mamogale argues that in the case of the Limpopo Province, meritocracy has been compromised. He thus calls for “party-specialist recruitment patterns” to be adopted, where party loyalty is combined with expertise as the basis for recruitment.

Politics of Belonging and the Representation of Citizens

Most African regimes are still highly centralized, largely non-competitive party systems, and the linkage between local communities and the state is dominated by clientelism and patronage.¹² Lauren M. MacLean and George Bob-Milliar focus on the politics of belonging and the representation of citizens at the local level. Together, MacLean and Bob-Milliar provide interesting insight into two different time periods in the development of Ghanaian democracy. MacLean focuses on the initial period following the democratic transition in 1999, and Bob-Milliar discusses the effects of participation on dynamics of representation after a decade of democratic consolidation in 2012. Both of these papers complicate the perception of Ghana as a strong democracy that is progressing along a linear path of democratic consolidation.

Lauren M. MacLean's "Citizen or Client?: A Conceptual Analysis of Everyday Politics in Ghana" explores the meaning and everyday practice of democracy on the ground to ordinary citizens in Ghana. The relationship between the local communities and the African state is frequently characterized by scholars as clientelism and contrasted pejoratively with the Western ideal-type of citizenship. MacLean's paper juxtaposes the abstract conceptualization of these two concepts in the literature with the everyday politics of individual Ghanaians. Starting with Afrobarometer data from 1999 and 2008, the paper first establishes subnational variation in different regions in Ghana with regard to political participation and belonging that do not parallel the distinctions in the literature between citizenship and clientelism. MacLean then undertakes a further "fine-grained," local-level study in two villages in the region that score highest in the indicators for political participation and belonging to further explore this puzzle. MacLean's paper shows that local political leaders and community-based institutions were especially salient avenues for representation for Ghanaians. She finds that, contrary to the scholarly conceptualizations, ordinary Ghanaians' notions are more entangled and reflect significant hybridity, including elements from both theoretical categories. For MacLean, "these village residents were neither perfect citizens nor clients but articulated their own conceptions of everyday politics." Maclean illustrates how everyday politics, the political attitudes and forms of everyday politics of ordinary Ghanaians, do not fit the common Western conceptual categories to theorize citizenship and clientelism.

These findings are salient in light of the arguments about the resurgence of low-level party activists in Ghana after the transition to multi-party politics in 1992 by Bob-Milliar in his paper "Party Youth Activists and Low-Intensity Electoral Violence in Ghana: A Qualitative Study of Party Foot Soldiers' Activism." He shows how these "foot soldiers" play an important role in mobilizing support for different political parties especially during recent elections. Bob-Milliar considers how politicians and party leaders use state resources, including government appointments, to dispense patronage to these foot soldiers. The paper reveals the persistence of neopatrimonial linkages between local communities and the state in hybrid democracies. Bob-Milliar contends that while electoral contests have been generally peaceful in Ghana, it is important to recognize the existence of such localized low-intensity violence instigated by these foot soldiers. Bob-Milliar demonstrates how clientelism drives the foot soldiers and highlights the pernicious effects for notions of citizenship and the Ghanaian democracy as a whole.

Field Research and Methodologies to Study the Politics of Local Communities and the State

The papers in the special issue and those discussed at the APSA-Africa workshop have been based on field research and illustrate the significance of this fundamental practice.¹³ Field research involves much more than landing in a particular site to gather data. Fieldwork means that the scholar becomes engaged or immersed in the community being studied in order to understand the phenomenon taking place within its own context. Thus, even when relevant Afrobarometer data exists, the authors' experiences in the field sites provided crucial insight for the formulation of their research questions, development of key concepts, and analysis of politics on the ground.

In many cases, field research is necessary because the questions about interactions between local communities and the state are new, or previously, key groups were not included in

existing data collection. For example, Chirisa's arguments about peri-urban Harare are based on extensive field research and contextual aspects and are supported by a sample of 402 questionnaires (with both closed and open-ended questions) from five sites: Whitecliffe, Hatcliffe, Caledonia, and Harare South's Southlea Park and Hopley. The politics of housing for peri-urban areas is a relatively new dynamic, and the precariousness of the tenancy of many of the respondents would have marginalized their participation in any previous data collection.

The authors in this special issue also highlight how an understanding of local communities and the state involves field research at multiple levels with a longer historical perspective. For example, Hoon's analysis traces changes over time and situates subnational bureaucratic and community-level of decision-making within the context of Botswana's national politics.

The special issue contributors also demonstrate the value of using multiple data collection techniques to approach questions from various angles and be able to triangulate among potentially competing perspectives. Hoon's paper analyzes the debates from the local press and interviews with district-level bureaucrats and NGO leaders to unpack strategies of recentralization in Botswana. Bob-Milliar's research on Ghanaian foot soldiers is based on a grounded and contextual understanding derived from extensive field research in local constituencies, which included interviews with foot soldiers and party leaders along with newspaper reports. MacLean combines findings of Afrobarometer with ethnographic observation and survey and focus group interviews in two villages. Harris uses aggregate data collected by the Afrobarometer project in combination with published secondary sources. Moreover, the findings in Harris' paper point to the need for further field research to tease out the mechanisms between experience of democracy and food insecurity.

The practice of conducting field research and its use by African and non-African Africanists, however, are not neutral and raises several normative issues that were discussed at the APSA-Africa workshop. In particular, these were about recognizing and being cognizant of how research positionality and situatedness within different power structures shapes access to field sites and our interpretations. Many of the scholars challenged the pretense of objectivity from an imagined ivory tower in the field and favored more participatory and interactive field approaches to negotiate a more level balance of power. In response to these discussions some of the workshop participants reflected on their positions in a newsletter for the African Politics Conference Group.¹⁴

Conclusion

In examining the varied relationships between local communities and the African state, the papers in this special issue highlight several important cross-cutting themes. First, several papers demonstrate that the African state is changing in important ways. Many African states have responded to external pressures to reorganize administratively, in particular, to decentralize, but these processes are often partial and incomplete. Various terms have been used to signify these local practices—local governance, community-development, local participation, local clientelism, and patronage. These concepts highlight the ongoing significance of the subnational level of African politics, as well as the debates and contention regarding the normative desirability of certain subnational actors and outcomes. The papers in this issue reveal the importance of conceptualizing and systematically studying subnational so

that we can begin to theorize the varied and dynamic interactions between local communities and the state over time in particular contexts.

Second, our papers reveal that the provision of public goods and services increasingly involves multiple new non-state actors. Indeed, many of these new subnational institutions and actors blur the traditional boundaries between the categories of state, market, and community, a theme that is emphasized throughout this special issue's papers. Our research emphasizes the necessity of going beyond a narrow geographical concentration on a particular community to analyze linkages that connect local, national, and transnational actors.

Third, African citizens are participating in politics at the local level through many more avenues than simply the sporadic elections held every several years in their countries. Representation occurs not only through the formal electoral institutions but through many informal institutions. Nevertheless, despite the significance of these on-the-ground politics, typically debates about African state–society relations have focused largely on the variation in more formal institutions at the national level.

Fourth, these papers demonstrate the importance of grounded field research for investigating the politics of local communities and the state. Scholars who work on such local governance questions—whether in rural or urban areas of Africa—lack access to systematic comparative work on many of the key questions of local politics. They often find that existing datasets or secondary sources are absent or insufficient. Almost all of the scholars therefore conducted fieldwork at the local level in order to collect original data for their studies. The fieldwork experiences of these authors demonstrated that simple notions of objectivity were futile in the study of African politics and also that there was no single model or template for conducting field research in Africa. Like the workshop, this special issue thus not only interrogates the substance of local communities and the state but also reflects critically on the research process for studying these important questions from varied and multi-disciplinary perspectives.

Finally, this special issue reveals the value gained from the collaboration between African and non-African Africanist scholars who share similar research interests. The APSA Africa 2012 Workshop facilitated the development of new networks among scholars working in different parts of the continent and in the US. Our hope is that these particular, person-to-person relationships between a relatively small number of colleagues will become broadened and institutionalized over time. With declining funds for field research available to both African and non-African Africanists, and the limited availability of new scholarship due to the lack of reliable power supply and internet speed, strengthening our collaborations promises to enrich our future understandings of local communities and the state in Africa.

Notes

- 1 Lund 2006; Galvan 2004; Hyden 2013.
- 2 Ntsebeza 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Geschiere 1993.
- 3 Piot 2010, 1999; Ferguson 2006, 1990; Leonard and Straus 2003.
- 4 See Reno 1998, 2011 and Brass 2012.

- 5 Mansuri and Rao 2013.
- 6 Arriola 2012; Bratton and Van De Walle 1997; Boone 2003; Pitcher 2012; Poteete and Ribot 2011; Ribot et al. 2006; Van de Walle 2002.
- 7 For additional information from past and future APSA Africa Workshops, including detailed proceedings from the 2012 workshop, see:
<http://www.apsanet.org/~africaworkshops/>. Many additional workshop papers are available as working papers at the APSA Workshop's Social Science Research Network website at
http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/JELJOUR_Results.cfm?form_name=journalbrowse&journal_id=2181663.
- 8 The workshop co-leaders included: Professors Parakh Hoon (Virginia Tech University), Lauren M. MacLean (Indiana University), Joseph Mbaiwa (University of Botswana-Okavango Research Center), Sethunya Mosime (University of Botswana), and Lungisile Ntsebeza (University of Cape Town). The co-editors of this special issue thank all of the co-leaders for their intellectual inspiration and guidance, but any errors in this publication are our own.
- 9 Hyden 1980; Chazan 1988; Mahieu 1990; Berry 1993; Tripp 1997.
- 10 Mkwandire 1995.
- 11 Lund 2006.
- 12 Englebert 2009.
- 13 Kapiszewski et al. 2015.
- 14 See link to the African Politics Conference Group's newsletter:
http://africanpoliticsgroup.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/APCG_Newsletter_Feb2013.pdf.

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