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The African neopatrimonial state as a global prototype

Daniel C. Bach¹

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of neopatrimonial rule was first applied to Africa in 1978, when Jean-François Médard undertook to account for the Cameroonian state's lack of institutionalization and "underdevelopment". The lack of distinction between office and officeholder, Médard went on, is masked behind discourses, juridical norms and institutions that nourish the illusion of a legal-bureaucratic logic. In the absence of a legitimizing ideology, the ruler owes his ability to remain in power to his capacity for transforming his monopolistic control over the state into a source of opportunities for family, friends and clients. Neopatrimonialism in Africa is still classically viewed as the outcome of confusion between office and officeholder within a state endowed, at least formally, with modern institutions and bureaucratic procedures. The introduction of "neo" as a prefix, means that neopatrimonialism is freed from the historical configurations to which patrimonialism had been associated by Weber. The display of legal-bureaucratic norms and structures coexists with relations of authority based on interpersonal rather than impersonal interactions. This coexistence of patrimonialism with legal-bureaucratic elements, begs the key question of the forms of interaction and their outcomes. Indeed, neopatrimonialism infers a "dualistic situation, in which the state is characterized by patrimonialisation, as well as by bureaucratization". Such dualism translates into a wide array of empirical situations. What is ultimately at stake, however, is the state's capacity (or lack thereof) to produce 'public policies: political systems where patrimonial practices tend to be regulated and capped should be distinguished from those where the patrimonialisation of the state has become all-encompassing, with the consequent loss of any sense of public space or public policy.

REGULATED FORMS OF NEOPATRIMONIALISM

In Africa, regulated forms of neopatrimonialism have been usually associated with the introduction of a policy of ethnoregional balance. The distribution of resources by the ruler takes place on an inclusive base. The emphasis laid on cooptation and redistribution, rather than coercion, contributes to promote a culture of mutual

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accommodation. The expected outcome is an increased state capacity to penetrate society and ensure compliance. Even though such notions as public ethics and common good may be undercut, regulated neopatrimonialism conveys its own brand of «moral economy» in so far as it favours redistribution processes that target the nation as a whole.²

The regimes of Jomo Kenyatta and by Félix Houphouët-Boigny were good examples of regulated neopatrimonialism. Within the Kenyan state, impersonal rules were made to co-exist with neopatrimonial practices designed to alleviate the risks that political competition might carry for the Nation-State³. Synergies between presidentialism, the single-party system and what amounted to an institutionalised system of patronage facilitated the incorporation of the periphery by the centre. Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, the regime of Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960-1993) exemplified the combination of personal rule with regulated neopatrimonialism. Direct control was exerted over the recruitment of the political élite so as "to balance ethnic, generational and even personal rivalries".⁴ The outcome was a hybrid political system where «strong personal power ... through patron-client relations [combined with] the use of modern bureaucratic agencies ». As in Kenya, the imprint of neopatrimonialism was regulated, capped and ring fenced.

The 1970s were the golden age of regulated neopatrimonialism in Africa. Commodity export prices were still high, the states often had access to significant resources for redistribution and comforting the rulers' personal power seemed compatible with ensuring state- (if not nation-) building. As a result, the integrative virtues of the resulting processes were often extolled.

PREDATORY FORMS OF NEOPATRIMONIALISM

Predatory forms of neopatrimonialism refer in Africa to systems where personal rule and resource control have reached a paroxysmic level, with a consequent "failure of institutionalisation... and thus of the state".⁵ The corollaries are the absence of a public space, and of any capacity to produce 'public' policies. Indeed, the privatization of the public sphere is carried to such extremes that it becomes conducive to its dissolution.

The Mobutu regime (1965-1997) is commonly associated to a thoroughly patrimonialised system. Mobutu's brand of neopatrimonial rule, observes René Lemarchand, differed from others on the continent due to an "unparalleled capacity to institutionalize kleptocracy at every level of the social pyramid and his unrivalled talent for transforming personal rule into a cult and political clientelism into cronyism".⁶ Also described by other authors as arbitrary, predatory or kleptocratic,

² J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37(1), 1999, p. 25-52.

³ D. I Bourmaud, « L'État centrifuge au Kenya », in Médard J.-F. (dir.), *États d'Afrique noire : formation, mécanismes et crise*, Paris, Éd. Karthala, coll. « Hommes et sociétés », 1991, p. 262.

⁴ R. C. Crook, "Patrimonialism, Administrative Effectiveness and Economic Development in Côte d'Ivoire", *African Affairs*, 88(351), 1989, p. 214.

⁵ J.-F. Médard, « L'État néo-patrimonial en Afrique noire », Médard J.-F. (ed.), *États d'Afrique noire : formation, mécanismes et crise*, Paris, Éd. Karthala, coll. « Hommes et sociétés », 1991, p. 339.

⁶ R. Lemarchand, "The Democratic Republic of the Congo: From Failure to Potential Reconstruction", in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of*

Mobutu's Zaire has called for parallels with sultanism –the term coined by Max Weber to characterize those extreme instances where the ruler's domination relies less upon traditional foundations than on the leader's arbitrary and uncontrolled power.

To summarize, the distinction between regulated and predatory forms of neopatrimonialism signals the two extremes of a diversity of empirical configurations. In the case of integral and predatory forms of neopatrimonialism, the ruler is the state. Conversely, regulated neopatrimonialism infers some capacity to craft 'public' policies. To put it differently, an operational distinction has to be drawn between patrimonial practices *within* the state and the patrimonialisation of the entire state.

THE AFRICAN STATE AS AN 'ANTI-DEVELOPMENTAL' STATE

The foundations of a political economy of neopatrimonialism were laid by Richard Sandbrook who had undertaken in the 1980s to relate the private appropriation of the state's powers to the developmental failure of African states.⁷ The neopatrimonial state, he subsequently argued, is an archetype of the anti-developmental state, with "economic objectives [subordinated] to the short-run exigencies of political survival" for the rulers and his regime.⁸ Göran Hyden similarly described bluntly as an "institutionalized curse" the spread of neopatrimonialism in Africa.⁹ By then, the African state, stereotyped as desperately corrupt and "klepto-patrimonial",¹⁰ provided an anti-model to the literature that, globally, attempted to conceptualize the developmental state.

The typology of Peter Evans, drawing from the experience of the first wave of emerging countries in East Asia (Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), identified three archetypes in accordance to the states' propensity to promote economic development. The model of the predatory and anti-developmental state was found to be in Africa, where, as in Mobutu's Zaire, "the preoccupation of the political class with rent seeking has turned the rest of society into prey." This was a confirmation Evans concluded, that "it is not bureaucracy that impedes development so much as the lack of capacity to behave like a bureaucracy."¹¹

Similarly, Atul Kohli's more recent overview of development and industrialization processes in 'peripheral' or 'emergent' countries draws from Africa his prototype of a highly ineffective and anti-developmental "neopatrimonial" state. Its characteristic feature is the absence of an "effective public arena" clearly differentiated from private interests, organizations and loyalties.¹² Nigeria is seen as

Terror, Cambridge (Mass.)/Washington (DC), World Peace Foundation/Brookings Institution Press, 2003, p. 31.

⁷ R. Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa's Economic Stagnation*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, coll. "African society today", 1985.

⁸ R. Sandbrook, *Closing the Circle: Democratization and Development in Africa*, Toronto/London-New York, Between the Lines/Zed Books, 2000, p. 97

⁹ G. Hyden, 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ I. McIntyre quoted in: P. Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism: Rent-Seekers or Real Capitalists?*, Honolulu, Asian Studies Association of Australia/Allen & Unwin/University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, p. 8.

¹¹ P. Evans, "Predatory, Developmental and Other Apparatuses: A Comparative Analysis of the Third World State", *Sociological Forum*, 4(4), 1989, p. 570.

¹² A. Kohli, *State-Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery*, Cambridge (UK)/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 408.

a near-perfect example of such a prototype that is also considered relevant to describe "almost all African states". Africa is hyphenated with predatory and integral forms of neopatrimonialism.

BEYOND AFRICA...

In Latin America, South-East Asia or the Communist and post-Communist societies of Europe and Central Asia, the diffusion of the concept of neopatrimonial rule has remained limited. Ongoing references to patrimonialism have also been adjusted to suit specific debates, as reflected by a rich crop of lexicographic and conceptual innovations.

In Latin America, patrimonialism still commonly refers to the legacy of the three centuries of Spanish and Portuguese presence.¹³ In the late 1950s, Richard Morse famously noted that patrimonialism could account for the persistence in contemporary South America of patterns of governance that drew their roots from Spain's imperial policy.¹⁴ Similarly in Brazil, the state is commonly depicted as "a bureaucratic state that traditionally has been at the service of a patrimonial order"¹⁵. Such commonly used notions as "patrimonial society", "patrimonial regime", or "patrimonial order" seek to stress the existence of continuities that transcend regime changes or the type of elites in power.¹⁶

One of the outcomes is that, in Latin America, the dividing line between 'tradition' and 'traditionalism' is often blurred. References to patrimonialism have, for instance, been extended so as to include the return of totalitarian rule, as in Brazil, Argentina or Peru during the 1970s. Patrimonialism became then a metaphor for the capture of the state by traditionalist corporate interests.¹⁷ Neopatrimonialism, which Oszlak was the first to apply to Latin America, merely referred then to "contemporary cases in which personalist government turns states into the private government of those possessing the necessary power for the exercise of political domination".¹⁸

In contrast with neopatrimonialism in Africa, personal rule was not associated with processes of disinstitutionalisation. The postulate was that a neopatrimonial regime could even have a developmental impact if the Dictator happened to be surrounded by a "true 'Court' of 'trustworthy men'...who act as placemen at key institutions, and a small staff of professionals in charge of the administration of certain large programmes (ie public works, industrial promotion)."¹⁹ There, as in other and more recent studies, the underlying assumption has been the lack of

¹³ G. Zabłudovsky, "The Reception and Utility of Max Weber's Concept of Patrimonialism in Latin America", *International Sociology*, 4(1), 1989, p. 51-66 ; R. Roett, *Brazil: Politics in a Patrimonial Society*, 3rd ed., West Port, Praeger, 1984.

¹⁴ R. M. Morse, "The Heritage of Latin America", Hartz L. (ed.), *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964, p. 157-158 .

¹⁵ R. Roett, 1984, *op. cit.*, p. 1 ; F. Uricoechea, *The Patrimonial Foundations of the Brazilian Bureaucratic State*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

¹⁶ R. Roett, 1984, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ S. Schwartzman, "Back to Weber: Corporatism and Patrimonialism in the Seventies", Malloy J.M. (ed.), *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977, p. 89-106.

¹⁸ O. Oszlak, "Public Policy and Political Regimes in Latin America", *International Social Science Journal*, 38(2), 1986, p. 229

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

incompatibility between patrimonialism and the rise of a bureaucratic and capitalist state. Latin American references to neopatrimonialism have also been exempt from any teleological assumption that the state was inexorably dissolving into informality.

In Africa and Latin America, the concepts of patrimonialism or neopatrimonialism have been linked to the discussion of institution- and state-building. In East and Southeast Asia it is the impact on the development of capitalism that provides an analytical thread. The outcome is a multiplicity of expressions designed to account for the interactions between state bureaucracies and private business – e.g. cronyism, oligarchic patrimonialism, predatory, rentier and even, in the case of Malaysia, ersatz capitalism.²⁰

The relationship between bureaucrats and business circles has also been central in debates on the conceptualization of the ‘developmental state’. By contrast, with the much-celebrated economic performances of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea in the 1960's, prospects for capitalist development in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia or Thailand were initially overlooked. Corruption and cronyism among rulers, bureaucrats and big business, were considered too intense. The intimation of a thoroughly patrimonialised state conveyed by this pessimistic prognosis was eventually challenged by the economic performance of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand in the 1990's. In Malaysia, for instance, the rise of internationally competitive forms of capitalist entrepreneurship was now treated as the counterpart of a state bureaucracy that was more regulated despite the persistence of “highly patrimonialistic relations between the state and business”.²¹

In the post-Communist states of Europe, the concept of patrimonialism still bears the imprint of Weber's writings on the administrative system of Petrine Russia.²² Patrimonialism, as applied to Communist and post-Communist political regimes is associated with two distinct yet closely intertwined strands of interpretations. A first type of reading stems from the analysis of patrimonialism as a historical or cultural model. Mikhail Maslovski, for instance, sees the development of patrimonialism within the Stalinist system as a ‘reversal’.²³ Hans van Zon similarly depicts post-Communist Ukraine as “a patrimonial state [that]...further[s] anti-modern tendencies in society.”²⁴ A second type of reading, broadly coincides with what the notion of regulated neopatrimonialism stands for. The concept describes modern political systems with a capacity to produce public policies. When Yoram Gorlizki characterizes the day-to-day working of the Stalinist state as ‘neopatrimonial’, he is insistent that he is not referring to a traditional system where “autocratic rule [rests] on institutional confusion and disarray, but...[to]... patrimonial authority coexisting alongside quite modern and routine forms of high level decision-making”²⁵

²⁰ Y. Kunio, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia*, Singapore/New York, Oxford University Press, 1988 ; N.J. White, “The Beginnings of Crony Capitalism: Business, Politics and Economic Development in Malaysia, c. 1955-70”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 38(2), 2004, p. 389-390.

²¹ Searle, 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²² M. Maslovski, “Max Weber's concept of patrimonialism and the Soviet system”, *Sociological Review*, 44(2), 1996, p. 295.

²³ M. Maslovski, 1996, p. 302.

²⁴ H. Van Zon, “Neo-Patrimonialism as an Impediment to Economic Development: The Case of Ukraine”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 17(3), 2001, p. 72.

²⁵ Y. Gorlizki, “Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers and the Soviet Neopatrimonial State, 1946-1953”, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), pp. 699-736.

A third type of interpretation specifically refers to situations where patrimonialisation tends to become integral. The analyses also acknowledge the influence of Africanist literature on interactions between personal rule, patronage and the disinstitutionalization of the state. Thus, in Ukraine, the political system dominated by Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005) has been characterized as neopatrimonial, in view of "the disintegration of the state apparatus, the capture of the state by ruling clans [and] the spread of corrupt practices in the state bureaucracy".²⁶ Integral forms of neopatrimonialism, however, find an almost perfect match with Islam Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan. The assimilation of neopatrimonialism to the disinstitutionalisation and informalisation of the post-colonial African state is echoed in this case by the 'creeping capture' of the political-administrative system inherited from the Soviet Union by networks of patronage and private interests.²⁷ The informalisation of interactions within the state is exacerbated by a system of personal domination based on the conversion of clanship alliances into patronage ties and the redistribution of state resources. The related rise of a "parallel power network, matching existing state hierarchy"²⁸, sketches a pattern reminiscent of the "shadow state" of William Reno.²⁹ In other words, neopatrimonialism in Uzbekistan amounts to an almost perfect illustration of the development of institutional underdevelopment.

CONCLUSION

The dissemination of the concept of neopatrimonialism in Africa has been particularly successful. Neopatrimonialism is extensively and casually discussed in studies and programmes conducted under the aegis of multilateral institutions, NGOs, 'think tanks', and international donor agencies, with the result of an association of the notion to an increasingly diverse range of subjects. Such a trajectory, however, has not been without a price.

Described by some as "endemic"³⁰, stigmatized by others as "a paradigm for all African seasons"³¹ neopatrimonialism is commonly equated with predatory and integral forms of personal rule. The outcome is a *doxa* that depicts the African state as quintessentially anti-developmental and infers its inevitable descent into informality and capture by criminal networks.

Neglected for all too long, the study of regulated or capped forms of African neopatrimonial rule calls for fresh empirical and theoretical attention. Reasserting the empirical relevance of regulated forms of neopatrimonialism will contribute to restoring the foundations for a truly comparative approach both within Africa and across world regions. The developmental trajectory of different waves of emerging countries is a powerful reminder that neopatrimonialism – i.e. the coexistence of

²⁶ van Zon, 2001, art. cit., p. 72.

²⁷ A. Ilkhamov, " Neopatrimonialism, interest groups and patronage networks: the impasses of the governance system in Uzbekistan", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2007, p. 75

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71

²⁹ W. Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge (UK)/New York, Cambridge University Press, coll. "African studies series, 83", 1995. W. Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge (UK)/New York, Cambridge University Press, coll. "African studies series, 83", 1995.

³⁰ A. Pitcher, M.H. Moran et M. Johnston, "Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa", *African Studies Review*, 52(1), 2009, p. 125-156; G. Erdmann & U. Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept", *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 45(1), February 2007, p. 95-119.

³¹ O. Therikildsen, "Understanding Public Management Through Neopatrimonialism: A Paradigm for all African Seasons?", in: Ulf Engel & Gorm Rye Olsen (eds), *The African Exception*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 36.

patrimonial and legal-rational elements with a political system - does not predetermine outcomes. In Africa, as elsewhere, monitoring cases of regulated or capped interactions between public space and private interests should have never ceased to call for attention.

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