

AUTHORITY VERSUS POWER DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA MUST INCLUDE ORIGINAL AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS¹

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Problems

This paper summarises three decades of my studies of original African public institutions, especially those in northern Ghana and adjacent areas of the Voltaic basin. From the outset I wish to stress that these institutions were invented by the Africans. The incumbents of offices, supported but also controlled by the people, managed for centuries to lead, administer and defend populations in areas comprising at least a number of villages but reaching sometimes up to populations of several hundred thousand.

Anthropologists, historians, and political scientists working in Africa have written on chiefdoms, kingdoms, principalities, chieftaincies, primitive states, traditional polities, segmentary states, politico-religious centralised political systems, early states and so on. Some of them have contrasted the centralised 'systems' with those which were segmentary or 'acephalous'. Indeed, political anthropology as a

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subdivision of social anthropology saw the light of the world through African data, published in the volumes such as *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), *The Nuer* (Evans-Pritchard 1940) and *Tribes Without Rulers* (Middleton and Tait 1958). The studies of politics in 'indigenous' Africa started only when those African institutions deemed to be 'political' institutions had been 'tamed' and incorporated into colonial regimes, later to become the modern independent states. Whereas the most visible representatives of the original African public institutions, dubbed 'chiefs', were abolished in some parts of the continent, in vast areas of Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa they exist till this very day and participate in public affairs on local, regional and state levels, either separately or as members of administrations, parliaments or governments.

The question with which we are concerned here is: What role do they fulfil in the post-independence period and how can they contribute to democratic decision-making in their respective countries?

Before we can attempt to answer this essential question, we have to evaluate the image which emerges from the numerous fieldwork accounts and analyses of these 'political' institutions by modern Africanist scholarship. One very important fact must be always borne in mind: by the time the European researchers began to observe and study indigenous African political institutions in the field, these were already being transformed by European colonialism. This led, in my opinion, to a number of serious misunderstandings.

Politics?

First of all, as did the early navigators, so conquerors, traders, missionaries and colonial administrators, 20th century historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists, both non-African and African, viewed African institutions through the prism of Western, European or American, eyes. The logic which constantly isolates politics from economics, and looks for boundaries between religion and kinship, has too facily led modern investigators to the conclusion that African leaders and the institutions they personified were of a political nature, comparable to western political institutions, part of one and the same evolutionist model. As these leaders and institutions were defeated and drawn willy-nilly into the western orbit, they were usually classified as less sophisticated elements within one linear typology of power. The typologies of both Marxists and structural functionalists were no exception.

Nevertheless, these African institutions were of a nature fundamentally different from that of the political institutions of the modern world. Perhaps they could be

compared to the institutions which existed in European antiquity or middle ages, but those institutions of the European past have been equally misunderstood and misinterpreted by modern Westerners. On closer examination we will discover that those public figures designated by modern scholars as chiefs and kings were not politicians *strictu sensu* and the institutions they embodied were not political institutions, and even less political systems. Certainly we can speak of centralised decision-making, but decisions of leaders were subject to various rules and limitations imposed by the populations which they were supposed to lead. In European eyes these limitations would be called ritual, religious, supernatural, or sometimes economic or kinship ramifications. The leader was equally subject and object of activities which in our eyes were not political (Balandier 1972; Busia 1951, 1967; Claessen and Skalník 1978; Clastres 1974; Geertz 1980; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987; Sigrist 1979; Skalník 1991; Skalník n.d.).

Power?

Secondly, the rhetorics of power dominated the discourse during the decades of intensive research into African anthropology, sociology, history and modern politics. This notion of power as unlimited domination was a typical invention of Europe which she tried to propagate throughout the world. However, in Africa the original institutions were formed out of resources which we might call syncretic. The political was indiscernibly integrated with economics, kinship and religion, which formed together an undivided whole. Various elements of leadership had their roots in different traditions, sectors of population, and localities. That was why power as domination did not exist there. Rather it was a plurality of authority stemming from the traditions of different segments of society which ensured that the whole population of a particular area shared ideas and practices related to public arrangements, and recognised the leaders who in turn respected the rules and accepted the influence of the population on public affairs. If leaders competed for offices this was not a struggle for power but a realisation of the authority that already existed as a potential and which they were expected to use (Havel 1985; de Heusch 1962, 1990; Izard 1985; Pasquinelli 1986; Skalník 1989).

The Dichotomy of Centralised and Acephalous?

Thirdly, modern investigators of African societies have contrasted centralised with diffuse (segmentary, acephalous, etc.) government. Similarly, many scholars and politicians along with them have drawn an insurmountable barrier between modern and 'traditional' or even 'primitive' Africa. This dichotomic conceptualisation has done much harm to Africa. It seemed to make logical the

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imposition of colonial chiefs and kings on 'headless' tribes, and it justified the dismantling of and disregard for original African institutions which were viewed as embodiments of backwardness. What escaped the theorists was that the originality of African institutions consisted exactly of the combination of features which the western scholar would call centralised and uncentralised, state and stateless (cf. Carneiro 1981; Claessen and Skalník 1981; Southall 1988).

Nanun

In this second part of the paper I shall try to illustrate the points made above with the use of data from my research on Nanun, a *naam* or 'chieftaincy' situated in what is today northeastern Ghana. As I have attempted to explain in detail the functioning of Nanun in a series of articles (Skalník 1983, 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1989, 1992a, n.d.) the text below will only summarise my findings.

The very name of this social formation is derived from the word for 'chief' - *naa* (plural: *naanima*) - and hand - *nuu*. The legend tells that the three *naam* of today's northeastern Ghana, i.e. Mamprugu, Dagbon and Nanun are related because they were founded by three brothers, sons of Naa Gbewaa. The incumbents of these three *naam* call each other my brother, *m'mabia*. The founder of Dagbon, Sitobu, is said to have pointed his hand in a southeastern direction and sent his younger brother Nmantambu to establish his *naam* there. This happened three to four hundred years ago. Nmantambu left with some warriors and other followers, some of them mounted on horses, which was typical for the *naanima* of the Voltaic basin (for the Voltaic area as a whole, see Skalník 1978, 1979). From Nmantambu two sublines or houses of *naam* holders derive. The Gbuxmayili (lion's house) and Banyili (bangle house) alternate to this very day in Nanun. Tradition holds it that there were three such houses but one, Suburi, was eliminated by the others in collaboration with the neighbouring Gonja. This must have happened at least two hundred years ago because the genealogy of the *naanima* of Bimbilla testifies to a strict adherence to the rule of alternation between Gbuxmayili and Banyili for at least 12 *naanima*. The alternation of *naam* is expressed in the following maxim: "If the sceptre of Banyili is put down, that of Gbuxmayili should be taken up. If then the sceptre of Gbuxmayili is put down, that of Banyili should be taken up". During the 20th century only six *naanima* - three from each house - have been incumbents of the *naam* of Bimbilla. The last alternation happened in 1981-1983 from Gbuxmayili to Banyili.

The area of today's Nanun was not empty of population when Nmantambu with his retinue entered the country. The not very numerous population, who probably spoke a language close to Nawuri, met the immigrants with both respect and hostility. Respect was accepted, hostility suppressed. Nmantambu passed through

particular villages, which consequently have acquired sacred status for both *naanima* and the autochthonous population. The religious shrines of the earth cult of the autochthons were accepted by the immigrants. A set of customs was gradually developed which provided for the division of responsibilities and controls in the new *naam*. The autochthons accepted, internalised and respected the existence of the *naam*, its rules and hierarchies. On the other hand, the *naanima* and their dependents submitted themselves to the requirements of the earth cult (*boxole*) and its priests (*tindanima*, sing. *tindana*). So the succession to the most important *naam* of Bimbilla, the capital of Nanun, is not determined only by the mentioned rule of alternation between two branches of the descendants of Nmantambu. On the contrary, the originally 'acephalous' autochthons play a decisive role in the procedures and rituals of *naa*'s funeral and selection of his successor from the other branch. Thus the room for manoeuvre of a *naa* was limited by the very people whom his ancestors had conquered in the past. The highest *naam* was to be validated by the autochthonous population.

The historical precedence of and respect accorded to the autochthons is expressed in kinship idioms. Whereas the Bimbilla Naa calls his 'colleagues' in Yendi and Nalerigu my brother (*m'mabia*), he addresses any *naakpema* or chiefly elder of the autochthons as *n'yaba* (my grandfather) and they conversely speak of the Bimbilla Naa as their *yanga* (grandson). The relation between the *naa* and the *tarma* or simple villagers is characterised by the usage of the term father (*m'ba*) and child (*m'bia*).

The Bimbilla Naa appoints and his *Kpatihi* (the master of ritual of the Bibilla court) enskins all village *naanima* within the sphere of the Bimbilla *naam*. This includes not only *naanima* from among the *nabih* or members of the two branches of the Nmantambu chiefly line, but also *naakpema* of Juo, Gambaxa, Jilo, Chichaxi, Kuku, Wulehe, Nakpayili, and Juali as well as the *naanima* of the sacred villages of Dalaanyili, Binda, Nakpayili and Duuni. However his relationship to the *naanima* among the autochthons is not a one-way superordination. Every Bimbilla Naa is supposed to respect the importance of the four sacred villages. For example, when passing near the village of Duuni, where Nmantambu is believed to have died, the Bimbilla Naa must be blindfolded and must never enter the village. After the *naakpema* have fulfilled their role as electors, the newly selected incumbent of the highest *naam* of Nanun has to come to the sacred village of Dalaanyili where Nmantambu once concluded a politico-ritual pact with the autochthons. There he enters blindfolded a special roundhut, walking backwards, in order to reach for a chiefly stick (*damli*) from among those left by the previous incumbents of the supreme *naam*. The length of the stick is believed to tell the length of his reign. The *naa* is reminded that his life is subject to forces outside his control.

During his time as the incumbent of the supreme *naam*, the Bimbilla Naa is

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obliged to visit the sacred village of Ponaayili (jointly administered by a female *naa* or *Ponaa* and a male priest called the *Kpandixli*). There he submits himself to the ritual bath in a special pan which is kept there under high secrecy and believed to be expandable. If it expands (*ashili tahle*) in the sacred room and cannot be taken outside for the bath, it means that the chief will die and his reign will not be recognised. If he does not voluntarily perform the bath ritual, it is believed in Nanun that he can attract a curse on the *naam* and also invalidate his particular incumbency of it. At the same time, by having bathed in Ponaayili, the Bimbilla Naa ceases to be able to have children. This ritual bath is a very important limiting factor. The Bimbilla Naa Dasana (1957-1981) was rumoured never to have gone to Ponaayili for fear of losing sexual potency and therefore to have caused the 1981 armed conflict between the Nanumba and the Konkomba. It is also believed in Nanun that his death in May 1981 was caused by either poison or unbearable stress when he saw that he could not prevent the conflict and realised that this could have been caused by his previous failure to respect the rules of the *naam*.

The death of the Bimbilla Naa sets in motion a prolonged series of procedures and rituals. He is buried the same day in an underground chamber under one of the roundhuts of the palace. Before burial, the body is dressed in solemn clothes and, held in a vertical position, is walked over the courtyard of the palace and put to sit among the skins and skin cushions in the chamber. At that stage the Bimbilla Naa is not considered dead, it is said that he has travelled, has gone to the farm (*o goya, o cham puuni*). His place is taken by the regent, *ghonlana*, or skin caretaker, who is his eldest son. But also installed is a so-called mock regent who takes on himself the clothes of the deceased. In this symbolic way people are made to understand that the Bimbilla Naa did not really die and 'reigns' together with the regent proper. Both participate in ceremonies during the prolonged ritual burial.

It takes a year or longer before this ritual funeral - *naakuli* - takes place. Only after proper performance of the ritual funeral can the Bimbilla Naa be considered really dead, and the new supreme *naa* be selected from the eligible members of the other branch of the Nmantambu chiefly line. The very continuity of Nanun depends on the autochthonous specialists. The ritualists from Dalaanyili and Binda as well as *Kpandixli* from Ponaayili sacred villages have to be invited by the *kubih*i or the children of the deceased *naa* to come to Bimbilla to perform *naakuli*. They come only after protracted negotiations which include extortion of money and 'gifts', the length and intensity of this symbolic blackmail depending on the level of deviance of the deceased from the rules of the *naam*. In the total darkness of a moonless night, the *Kpandixli* and Dalaanyili people open the grave and perform a secret fire ritual whereby the Bimbilla Naa is proclaimed dead. The *kubih*i must provide a horse and a bull which is secretly killed and eaten in the

middle of the night.

On the occasion which I observed, the next day the *Kpandixli*, holding a special hooked stick and dressed in a thick coat and cap decorated with cowries, together with other similarly dressed ritualists from Binda and Dalaanyili, sacrificed a red cock and a male goat. Later the same morning, the Dalaanyili people lured a dog by singing in front of the palace. There they put on his neck a string and dragged the dog around until he was dead. The dog symbolised human beings who were sacrificed in olden days during the *naakuli*. In the afternoon of the same day, *yil gilgu* or the threefold circling of the palace was performed. The circling, in fact a special jumping dance, was performed by the regent and mock regent, followed by the children of the deceased, and tailed by the *Ponaa* and her relatives in cowrie head dresses. The *Kpandixli* and the Dalaanyili ritualists performed a hoe ritual which had to be watched by the regent and mock regent. The latter are also crucial personalities in the ritual of mock battle which forms part of the *naakuli* as well. Other dignitaries from among the autochthons participated in the ritual of fetching water which was performed at the wells site by the Bimbilla Naa's widows stripped to waist.

The autochthonous ritualists virtually reigned over Bimbilla town during the *naakuli*. The town was in tension and everybody feared them. The people of the *naam* were reminded that the autochthons control them ritually and the *naam* could not continue without them. This belief was and is shared by all the Nanumba, whether of immigrant or autochthonous stock.

The *naakpamba* (sing. *naakpema*) or chief's elders whose number is seven or eight (depending on whose reports one accepts) are crucial for the selection of the new Bimbilla Naa. They are all believed to be of the autochthonous stock and they occupy skins in the villages to the east and south of Bimbilla. Although the *naakpamba* are enskinned by the Bimbilla Naa, they are not eligible to compete for the *naam* of Bimbilla. Their type of *naam* is of a different kind, being older than the 'real' *naam* of Nmantambu. Theirs is the authority of the place, of the gods which reside on their territory. For example, the Wulehe Naa is custodian of the god Napaxa (lit. *naa*'s wife). The Lanjiri Naa of Kuku is master of the Malizugu god which resides in a spring from which elderly women drink in the belief that it will neutralise their 'natural' tendency to witchcraft. One can conclude that the *naakpamba* who act as the electoral college in the selection of the new paramount are more sacred and feared than the man whom they are selecting. It is not the nominal leader of Nanun who is sacred but his electors.

Naam babu (lit. holding the *naam*) or the selection of the Bimbilla Naa is the best example of the subordination of the Bimbilla Naa and all the descendants of Nmantambu to the ideological authority of the autochthonous *naakpamba*. The

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substance of the relationship between the *naakpamba* and the *naanima* is perhaps best exemplified during the night of the selection. The moon that night must be high. The leader of the *naakpamba*, who is Juo Naa, sits in the *paani* (eldest wife's) room of the palace of the deceased Bimbilla Naa. The Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa enter the room with the selected candidate of the *naam* of Bimbilla, holding him tight. The other electors such as the Jilo Naa, the Dibsi Naa and the Chichax Naa keep guard outside and chase away any other possible witnesses. The candidate is presented to the Juo Naa with the words: "*Ti baya a bla la*" which means "We captured your slave". The Juo Naa answers: "*A yanima n'sona. A banima n'sona*" meaning "Grandfathers will help you. Fathers will help you". The candidate is then bathed in a special herb bath. Beside the Juo Naa, the Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa and also *Kpatihi* are present. *Kpatihi* then performs *naam kparbu* by putting the chiefly gown and cap on the candidate.

The enrobed *naa* is then led secretly through the deserted streets of the midnight Bimbilla to a house where he is to be confined for a week. He walks alongside a donkey, his hand on the donkey's back. (According to the tradition - *kali* - the new *naa* should have ridden on the donkey's back.). Finally the outdoor ceremony or *namyibu* closes the cycle. The new Bimbilla Naa from the other *naayili* than the preceding one then sits in state surrounded with his paraphernalia and courtiers (*nayilkpamba*, lit. elders of the *naa*'s compound or palace). His first obligation is to go to the sacred village of Dalaanyili to pick his sceptre or chief's stick *damli*. By this ritual the circle of activities dictated by the autochthons seemingly closes. During the daily activities of his incumbency, the Bimbilla Naa is advised by his *nayilkpamba* among whom Muslims gain ever more influence. Nevertheless, the imperative of death and the potential wrath of the autochthons and their gods keep the Bimbilla Naa and actually all the *naanima* from among Nmantambu's descendants in deference, respecting the rules of the *naam* and the division of roles in Nanun.

Twentieth Century Conflicts

Nanun was an independent entity for centuries. It is sometimes argued that it was part of the spheres of influence of Asante or Gonja, even Dagbon. But we may conclude that, viewing the specific nature of authority in Nanun which is both diffuse and centralised, the neighbouring indigenous African authorities did not influence in any substantial way the nature of public life in Nanun. The situation changed drastically with the defeat of the Nanumba warriors by the German colonial power in 1896. The power model entered Nanun only with them. Resistance against the invaders could not succeed because, besides the *naam* of Bimbilla, there were less important *naam* of Dakpam and Nakpaa, and they, having their own warriors, chose to fight separately from the Bimbilla Naa. The

military defeat did not however mean the end of Nanun and its *naam*. The latter as an idea, institution and value continued because it was shared by the whole population and served its purposes better than the colonial pacification by power of weapons and bureaucracy. The Germans tried to intervene in the operation of the succession rules (Skalník, 1983, 1987 and especially 1989: 147-151) and even 'deskins' one Bimbilla Naa, but they failed because they misunderstood the logic of authority in Nanun. The Nanumba eventually outwitted the colonizers. The British who came after the Germans again tried to streamline the law of succession by writing its rules down. The same futile aim was tried again and again during the post-independence period by both republican and military regimes. The drafting of each of the four constitutions of the independent Ghana was paralleled by administrative pressures on the Nanumba chiefs to put on paper their succession rules or to streamline the succession, or both, so that it would become predictable and exclude 'succession quarrels'.

The seed of future conflict was sown again when the British and later independent Ghana proclaimed the right of every citizen to move and live where he or she wished. Migration is nothing new in Africa, but always the newcomers are expected to submit themselves to the local rules. Encouraged by the power umbrella of the colonial and postcolonial state, the Konkomba settlers in Nanun, after their initial acceptance of the rules, stopped respecting the *naam*. They claimed to be the owners of the land which, according to tradition, but also according to the state constitution, belonged to the Nanumba. The Konkomba even tried to establish their own model of authority within Nanun (*oxbor* or chief) but without the consent of the Bimbilla Naa and the autochthonous dignitaries (Konkomba Youth Association's various public statements: Skalník 1986a, 1986b, 1989). The Nanumba, conversely, decided to introduce village *naanima* in Kpsaland, formerly a hunting area for the Nanumba under the supervision of the Juali Naa, one of the autochthonous *naakpamba*. This area was settled mostly by the Konkomba from the early 1960s onwards after the Ghanaian state built a road through it. For years the Nanumba skin was in litigation with the Atwode stool (with its centre in Nkwanta in the northern Volta Region) over who owned Kpsaland. The Nanumba finally won the dispute in 1979 (Skalník 1985, 1986a, 1986b). The tension between the *naam* and the Konkomba quest for their own sovereignty, coupled with the weakening of the Ghanaian state during the years of Acheampong-Akuffo and PNP regimes led eventually to the bloody conflict of 1981.

Many Nanumba and Konkomba died in the two instalments of the 'war' in 1981. I concluded then in my study of the conflict that the reasons for it were not traditional disputes or a struggle against feudal customs of the Nanumba, as the press and some politicians supposed, but issues which stemmed from the new situation under colonial and postcolonial state hegemony. Unfortunately, the stop

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put to the fighting by the Ghana Army was not followed by further work for lasting peace between the two groups. The PNDC government withdrew armed forces from Nanun within a month of its accession to power. The commission of inquiry was suspended by the PNDC and its findings never made public. It was left to the two parties to the conflict to build new relations between themselves. The leaders seemed to have agreed on a *modus vivendi* according to which the Konkomba living in Nanun might have their own chiefs if they wished, but must do so within the framework of the *naam*. The Nanumba would remain the exclusive landowners in Nanun but Konkomba would enjoy the right of land use under certain conditions. This arrangement seemed from the start to be too fragile. With any crisis in the leadership, or hesitation on the part of the state, a new wave of fighting was liable to follow.

This proved true in early 1994 when thirty Nanumba villages were burnt down by the Konkomba in retaliation for the killing of a Konkomba by a Nanumba during a market quarrel. The Konkomba claim to the Nanumba land reportedly stood behind the latest stage of the conflict. As I could analyse in the field in September 1994, past inconsistent conduct by the Ghanaian state as the ultimate guarantor of peace were a major factor which allowed the conflict to flare up again. The killings in March 1995 showed that the Ghanaian government did not pay enough attention to the resolution of the conflict. I fear that the northern enmity, especially if combined with similar conflicts elsewhere in Ghana, could one not too distant day rock the whole foundation of modern Ghana.

Conclusion: the *Naam* and Democracy in Africa

The *naam* with its incumbent and subjects, like many similar institutions all over Africa, has lost its nominal independence since the introduction of colonialism. Has it lost its importance as well? The colonial administrators tried to use these institutions in the "indirect rule" policies which were parts of authoritarian power models quite alien to the democratic rules prevailing in the metropolitan countries. Some 'chiefs' were dubbed collaborators with the occupying powers. The independent regimes either continued to use 'chiefs' as part of local government or ignored them. Sometimes they adopted hostile attitudes and even abolished these authorities altogether, as in Uganda and Burkina Faso. It seems that these extreme measures did not best serve the population, which lost the guidance that they had had from these authorities. However, the modern governments also were losers because they in fact suppressed a loyal opposition of a truly African character. As I have tried to show elsewhere, neglecting the viewpoint and authority of the *naam* and its incumbents, in the same way as other original institutions in other parts of Ghana have been neglected, does not transform Ghana into a genuine nation-state (Skalník, 1992b). It may cause revolutions like that led

by today's President Rawlings to fail to attract the full support of rural people (Skalník, 1992c).

One of the advantages of so-called traditional institutions is that people recognising particular authorities may with little difficulty meet their 'chief' and table their grievances or wishes without delay. The 'chiefs', in their turn, may go directly to the head of the modern state (e.g. of Ghana) and discuss together the problems of their 'traditional areas'. In a sense *naam* and similar institutions are elements of direct democracy complementing representative democracy - which in some African countries is even absent because of military coups. Another significant feature is that the *naam* is associated with a strict division between its incumbents and the military or the different warrior categories. The warriors can never become *naam* holders. Nevertheless the most important features seem to me the checks on the abuse of authority enforced by the autochthons which were discussed above.

Democracy in general and modern or postmodern democracy in particular stands and falls with the mechanisms of control which prevent one category of power or its human servants from disregarding constitution, laws and rules. Mechanisms such as *naam* contribute to the process whereby state officials, and the institutions they occupy, are retrained from becoming too powerful. As we know power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Models of public affairs which do not rely on, nay do not need power such as Nanun's *naam*, can become important correctives of the power of the modern imported state. Much will depend on the humility with which the powerholders of modern African states accept the authority of original African institutions and show willingness to learn from the democratic principles on which these institutions rest.

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