

Power in Complex Societies in Africa

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Guest Editor

This special issue on Africa is offered as our contribution to one of the central research traditions in African studies, and indeed in anthropology as a whole. Partly because of this tradition, and more importantly because of the nature of field work conditions in Africa, political organization has always attracted a great deal of the anthropologist's attention no matter what part of the continent he has elected to study. The colonial situation and the movement towards independence of new nation states has only tended to exacerbate this prominence, first of all by bringing to Africa other research workers like the political scientists who are devoted to dealing solely with political organization, and secondly by involving millions of people in political movements and political issues under the banners of national leaders and their political parties.

It has been our intention in this volume to obtain as representative a sample as possible of superior-subordinate relationships in complex African societies. The original invitation to contributors pointed out that superior-subordinate relationships could refer to hierarchical relations within one institution in a society such as kinship, government, religion, or economics. On the other hand it could also refer to hierarchical relations cutting across several institutions in one society such as class or caste distinctions, or more elaborately, writers might wish to compare superior-subordinate relationships among a group of African societies. Using this frame of reference contributors have been left free to focus on any aspect of power at whatever level of scale they wished using any theoretical approach considered to be adequate to the task. It was also decided to limit the studies to those dealing with "complex" societies. This term refers to con-

temporary societies having greater internal organizational complexity than those dealt with under the Group B rubric of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 5) or more recently the segmentary societies dealt with by Middleton and Tait (1958). This leaves a very large group of societies of several different varieties; a good deal more various in fact than would be assumed from the original Group A category of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) which they use to cover all societies that "have centralized authority, administrative machinery, and judicial institutions..." (1940: 5). Certainly all the societies dealt with here do, in fact, have some kind of centralized government, however they are sufficiently different from one another in certain respects to merit some form of sub-division.

In the present issue, complex societies are represented by three basic types. First there is the indigenous African state, now often a part of a larger national entity. The Emirates of Northern Nigeria, and the state societies of Uganda represent such a variety. Secondly, there are societies organized as states either aboriginally or in the contemporary setting, or both, which are characterized by superior-subordinate relations between separate ethnic or racial groups. This quality is one of the primary factors in the organizations of the political relations within the state. Examples of this type would be Ruanda-Urundi (with Tutsi and Hutu in the superior and subordinate positions, respectively), or the Rhodesias and South Africa where the racial split is a well-known feature of the state. Thirdly, there is the urban configuration, which may actually have characteristics taken from the previous two types, but which also has separate and special problems of political organization because of its high population density.

Our coverage of these types both geographically and in terms of each type is not nearly as complete as we would like it to be. The general reader is invited to expand his understanding of these problems by referring to the book review section which has been planned with a view to discussing contemporary work already completed on superior-subordinate relations in complex African societies. The specialist reader is invited to comment critically on our various approaches and to carry on where we

have left off, using his own data on these types of societies to formulate better typologies, and perhaps even a general theory for this important research area.

Unfortunately, the issue is already too long for the inclusion by the editor of a detailed analysis and comparison of the various contributions. This will however be published separately in the near future. Suffice it to say here that this issue documents over and over again the necessary and stringent dichotomy that must be maintained in our thinking between sociological and cultural reality on the one hand, and the ideology or idealization of the society and its culture on the other, which may exist in the people's minds only as a formalistic over-simplification of their own society. The ideal or formal structuring of social relations which may exist as part of the tradition of a society is only one stimulus among a vast array of others to which people respond in hierarchical social systems. Primary among the stimuli affecting people is the locus of real coercive power and the demands, formal and informal, of those holding this power. In other words, superior-subordinate relationships can only be fully understood when these real loci of power are isolated and described. Among social scientists it is the anthropologist with his intensive field work techniques who can provide the basic framework of data and theory concerning this kind of political life at the local level; without this basis, it is impossible to penetrate in any comprehensive way, the political evolution of Africa.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributing authors who have helped to bring this issue out in its present form. Professor Marcel Rioux, the permanent editor, and Father Joseph-E. Champagne, O.M.I., the president of the Canadien Research Centre for Anthropology have given invaluable help in processing the manuscripts, and more basically in offering us space in the journal for this special issue on Africa. I am also indebted to Professor J. W. VanStone who has acted as book review editor, and given much encouragement and advice from his own editorial experience.

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