# The common ground: African notions of power

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This paper is written as a discussion exercise, to open the four sessions on secular states and religious societies. Despite some more extensive ethnographic examples it is very much work in progress - a presentation outline - trying to combine ideas about power in Africa from very disparate sources and impressions. The combination of some detailed cases with rough and ready generalizations is explicitly meant to generate discussion and the ways to link local processes with national dynamics in Africa.

# The common ground: power, sacredness and the secular state in Africa

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## 1. Secularization

Secularization refers to the Latin "seculum", century, time, and implies the separation of worldly time with religious sacred space. Secular time is conceived when a difference is made between secular history and sacred history. This ties in the notion of secularity with 1. A dominant sacred time and history and 2. A way to define a reality outside the sacred history. The first occurs in fact only in the religions of the book, where the sacred history is the dominant discourse; the second one rules out, in principle Islam, i.e. those religions which neither accept nor define a secular time and space outside the sacred one. So, the conception of a secular world is in fact an aspect of Judeo-Christian life, and in the history of the world a relative newcomer and stranger. As a historical process in Europe secularization is characterized by

- the diminishing role of organized religion
- the acknowledgement of a legitimate world beyond the religious realm
- the disengagement of religion with social and political issues
- the transposition of religious action to worldly institutions for governance
- the erosion of a religious world view, a disenchantment of the world.

In Europe this secularization had a long history in the formation of nation/states, and the gradual redefinition of sovereignty, in which the citizen – civil society – gradually took over from the first two estates, nobility and clergy. Both the reformation, which distinguished a legitimate individual quest for knowledge from the collective authority, and later Enlightenment, which liberated the empirical quest from religious conviction, were necessary prerequisites for the types of secularization processes that have formed present-day nation states, in fact were the model for such states. Indeed, Europe has exported those nation states in its colonial quest; even the whole project of European expansion in itself probably has been highly relevant for the secularization of the Atlantic seaboard. So, the ex-colonies inherited a historic contingency in which the separation of church and state was considered not only a self-evident fact, but also a result of and prerequisite for modernization and later development.

The notion of secularization or secularity presupposes a religious claim on reality, presupposes a religion that has a definite sense of dominion over 'this world' and makes historical claims. Such a religion is either all-pervading or dominates discourse on history. How do African religions, usually dubbed African Traditional Religion as if it were one type, fare in this respect? First the pervasiveness of religion. At a time when anthropologists still dared to speak about "Primitive Religion" (long ago!) one of the leading ideas was that traditional religions were all-pervasive, as a continuous presence in the lives of the people in question. The world view of the "primitive" was thought to be totally dominated by his religion, his life a continuous expression of beliefs and rituals. That notion has been disproved time and again. Mary Douglas emphatically stated that "the idea that the lives of Africans are dominated by religion is nonsense". My own experience is similar. The Kapsiki, for instance, regulate their lives according to rules of social conduct, individual expediency and some religious rules, all in due time and due course. African religions have – if we do use the notion of secularization – an in-built secularity: rituals belong to a definite time and place, and the rhythm of normal life and liminal times is expressed in rituals, but do belong together as two sides of the same coin. As for the other claim, religion as dominant world view and a definition of history, traditional religions are predominantly oral. Their sense of history is dominated by the present, not the other way around and the distinction between sacred history and secular time is not made. So secularization as such is never an issue in local religions. In order to show the complex underpinning of the relation between power and sacredness in Africa, I will dwell at length on a few selected ethnographic examples: sacred kingship, and the "ecology of sacrality" in Africa.

**2. Sacred kingship: violence and ritual**

From the beginning of anthropology the close alliance of power and sacredness has been on the agenda. James Frazer, usually dubbed "sir" as well, started his monumental work on magic "The Golden Bough, with one central phenomenon, sacred kingship. His description is breathtaking,

> In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at any instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest, a king and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or craftier. The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his (Frazer 1971 (1922): 1,2).

Of course this picture was not about Africa, but about Nemi, a semi-mythical place in Northern Italy. But the theme, as Frazer makes clear immediately (which for this polygraph means within a few hundred pages!) is not only relevant for antique Europe, but for all the world. Especially Africa furnishes him with one of his best examples, i.e. in the writings of Seligman on the Shilluk. For Seligman's account on the Shilluk regicide by an eager rival, so closely echoes the *Rex Nemorensis* that no better actual illustration was available for Frazer.

Shilluk regicide has generated a huge discussion in anthropological circles, as after Fraser, Seligman and Lienhardt, also Evans Pritchard, Gluckman, Girard and Simonse have dwelt at length on this fascinating phenomenon. The Seligmans had met king Fadyet (1903-1917) during their first visit to Shilluk in 1911 and to their astonishment the king was extremely sleepy during their visit. A courtier of the king later explained that the king did not sleep at night for fear of assassination, which they interpreted in the Frazerian sense, a survival of an earlier version of kingship, when the king had to guard himself against attacks from his would-be successors, mainly his sons. They concluded that only the sleepiness was the survival, and that regicide belonged to a distant past. Later research showed that Fadyet case had good reasons for a real fear: he had been installed by the British after his predecessor has allied with the Mahdists first and later with the French. Fadyet had killed more than his share of rivals (non-kin that is), and indeed had to fear reprisals from that corner. Eventually he was killed secretly (Simonse 1988:177).

Yet, the picture of the sleepy king, safely dozing away when foreign visitors shield him from assassination, remained powerful, and indeed regicide was more than a rumor of the past, it was a regular feature of Nilotic political organisation. The Shilluk had two variants, one is which an old king was incarcerated or strangled, and another in which a rival killed his aging father. Evans Pritchard considered the first variant as a myth, and the second one as political reality. Shilluk rebellions were based, in his view, on a North-South division and alliances made by the king's sons with that part of the realm the king did not stem from, and from where the queen originated. Gluckman ( ) later would use the Shilluk example in his treatment of rituals of rebellion. Girard and especially Simonse in his footsteps, interpreted the killing of the king as series of variants on violence as a consensus generating mechanism (Girard , Simonse 1988); the motifs for regicide, according to Simonse, vary between the ritual solution of ecological problems (rain, locusts), the association of general well-being and fertility with the physical prowess of the king and political rebellion, but his main point is that in all cases violence is an integral part of the continuation of kingship. And that violence is, first of all, a sacrificial one, victimizing the central symbol of the society. The ritual link between kingly health and societal well-being has a violent corollary: the sheer brutality of the actual killing of the king. Symbols galore in that killing itself: either in great stealth, or strangled in public, either incarcerated or squeezed between hinging doors, either a throat cut during a stolen hour of sleep or squashed under the combined weight of all the women in the village.

## 3. Power and rain

Now, all this is the Nilotic area, and most is in the past. Yet, some motifs of this complex of sacred king killings are found in other places of Africa as well as in the African present. Whether all rulers in question can be called ‘kings’ is debatable, like it is in Simonse’s research (Simonse 1992). The main point is that throughout Africa’s history and ethnographical present local and regional rulers have been associated with much more than just power; in fact, political power in Africa has almost never been just that, political. The most obvious of all associations are the ones mentioned: fertility, health and rain. Africa’s fertility orientation, not surprising in a continent where historically people have been more of a scarce commodity than land, is almost a stereotype. Many African rulers have been held accountable for the general “state of the nation”: the virility of the ruler often was highly relevant for the fertility of his people, as testified by tales about kings or chiefs who had to commit suicide when impotent (Jacobsson-Widding 1990). Whether discourse or actual history is hardly relevant, just as in the case of the incarcerated Shilluk king, as anyhow the association of political power and fertility-*cum*-health is dominant. Even more telling is the association with rain. Rain and power are intricately linked in many African societies, the most clearly in fact in the Nilotic groups mentioned above; in many cases the difference between king and rainmaker is hard to make. However, the connection with rain brings about a fundamental aspect of African notions of power that calls for more extended ethnographic example, this time from my own Kapsiki experience.

The Kapsiki/Higi from North Cameroon and Northern Nigeria form a village based society with little political centralization (van Beek 1987); above the village level only the present day canton is discernible, which has no pendant in traditional political structures. And at a higher level, the group is split into two parts through the international border between Nigeria and Cameroon, as the group is situated “à cheval” on the border. It is the village headman (maze) who performs the rituals for the whole village, assisted by the head blacksmith and a small college of clan elders. One of his duties is to lead in the ‘rain hunt’ when the rains fail after the first onset, at the start of the rainy season. The ritual consists of a communal hunt, during which a series of holy places are visited, most important among which is the burial mound of the village founder, the culture hero of the main Kapsiki mythical corpus. In this central myth, the culture hero Hwempetla meets the rain in person[1]

> Hwempetla, a young adult in this part of the corpus, wants to marry the daughter of Rain. He tries to steal her, but everytime he makes an effort, Rain starts to grumble. At last Rain asks Hwempetla: "Why do you want to steal my offspring. If you would succeed, the rains will never stop and devour your little piece of ground, tearing it apart. Is that what you want? You stay down there, I remain aloft, going from one village to another." Hwempetla, who still wants the girl, strikes a bet with Rain: he wants a favour if he can hide himself from Rain for eight days. Thus is done. Hwempetla then hides between the grains (couch) in a beer jar in Rain's own compound. Rain searches all the earth, tearing houses asunder, striking at trees, in mice burrows, termite hills, under rocks and boulders. Tired to the bone Rain returns home after eight days of windy search, and there he finds Hwempetla, who reveals his hiding place. "You are right," Rain says, I have torn the whole earth asunder, while you were in my own compound. I, Rain, reside with nobody in particular, I am anywhere. If you are thirsty with your small mountain, than simply tell me" I am thirsty" and I shall pour myself at your doorstep. Do not buy rain anywhere, but ask me."[2]

So *Va* is a person, someone related to *shala*. In some representations the ram is his symbol, but according to rainmakers Rain is "like a human being", like a white person in fact:

> There are two *Va*, one man, one woman; both are long, have a red complexion and have long blond hair. If someone swears an oath invoking them [not unusual] they check the oath and hit any oath breaker with the stick they always carry. Those oath breakers later shall bit hit by lightning, the "knife of Rain". Va walks on the surface of the earth, shakes himself as a porcupine whenever rain is needed. His wife only walks with him when they have to kill somebody. In that case they appear in the culprit's compound in the form of a ram, wrapped in a goatskin like a corpse is, or with a "cache sexe" in the case of a woman. When many people see them and cry out

"let him go, let him go" they might renounce their victim, leave their clothes behind and retreat to the heavens where they live.

The second major way to procure rain is through rain makers; two thirds of the Kapsiki villages have a resident rain maker. His job is to perform sacrifices on special jars he keeps in his house. His prowess derive from the central ritual place in the wider mountain area, Gudur or Mcakelé. Most mountain groups recognize the ritual pre-eminence of this village (situated between Mokolo and Mokong): the chief of Gudur is the ritual authority par excellence in the area. Having the rain maker perform a sacrifice for Va, is called “buying rain” An example:

The rains had come, and gone too soon. The young crops on the field, the tender sorghum and Pennicetum sprouts, withered in the scorching sun. The month of May started with some beautiful showers, but June dried up. In Gouria, one of the Kapsiki villages along the border with Nigeria, the older men discuss the problem at the *kelungu*, the stone benches under one of the rare fig trees in the village. "Time to sacrifice the melè va", someone ventures, and most agree. However, the rain maker, Cakereda, will have to be convinced: "He does not like to be commanded in his *melè* (jar)", one chief's councelor points out, "any time we speak him about it, he resists; according to him he alone commands the jar". Still, it has to be done, so the elders set out to Cakereda's hut, with one white chicken. As expected, Cakereda is reluctant, but promises to have the sacrifice performed the next morning, just before the Gouria market.

The next day, the elder brings along a red rooster, as the divination has indicated so, and me. The rainmaker is pleased with my presence, as white people are considered kinsmen of the rain, and he knows me well by now. So this time his reluctance is slight; with some gusto he tells me that formerly the elders had to beat him into performing the sacrifice, thus underscoring his own importance in the village.

The sacrifice itself follows rouhly the general pattern of Kapsiki sacrifices. Central in the proceedings is the jar of the rain, *melè va*, reported to stem from Gudur, together with Cakereda's lineage. A smal hut, the *ce va*, houses it, with some other paraphernalia: a small jar, some odd shaped stones and six irregular lumps of clay. According to Cakereda all stem from the almost mythical village Gudur, where his ancestor was the brother of the chief of Gudur, the greatest chief in the wide region and a rainmaker of huge repute.

In the early morning, three *ntsu*, hollow stones (meules dormantes) close to the entrance of the rain hut, are ritually washed with sesame stems and water. Cakereda pours some of the water on the doorstep of the rain hut: "We are thirsty, we are thirsty". Then he takes all paraphernalia from the hut, and puts them on the ground, next to the hollow stones. The village chief, the *mnzefè* (the village priest) and the chief black smith join us at the *cè va.*

Seated on one of the lumps of clay, the village chief takes the red rooster and Cakereda cut its throat, the blood dripping on the jars, stones and clay:

> *"Shala ta rhweme, menehwete zhèhwu ta ndere 'ya, nahe 'ya ndeke wusu kazeme nganga, mpi deve va rha: ndeke mu yèmu kawuza ha; mba na kepetleke wundu le hwa, kade dlè 'ya we"*
>
> (god in heaven, I suffer from thirst, now I have given you to eat; I ask you, give us water to cultivate our sorgo, do not stab anyone with your knife [lightning], I do not want any jealousy".

The bloodied objects are put back in the hut, the door shut. Again the rain maker laves the hollow stones with sesame water. During the ritual, the market gets into a good swing. Cakereda's hut borders on the market place, bu nobody else takes any notice, engrossed in buying, drinking and playing "caca", a game of hazards with cowri shells. At dusk Cakereda's wife cooks millet mush and broils the rooster. The village officials long gone, the rain maker and I terminate the ritual. He takes the jars and stones from the hut, and smears mush, sauce and chicken liver on each of them as well as on the hut:

> *"Shala, a 'ya ndere 'ya, nde nganga kezeme, kwelènge ng'yè, ndeke Da yèmu ha"*
>
> (God, I am thirsty, here is food for you, let us be healthy, give us water to cultivate sorgo".

Some *hangedle va* (Cissus quadrangulatus) is put on the main jar, then everything is put back in the hut. The rest of the food is eaten by the rain maker.
The ritual was effective, well timed or both. Towards the evening some clouds gathered, and when the many visitors from neighbouring Mogodé started home, showers met them on the road. To the delight of the Gouria people, the rains fell only on Gouria fields, very little in other villages. For me, of course, a very lucky result: "Va (rain) has respected the white man; he should from now on always help our rain maker", and Cakereda since that time, till his death some five years later, called me "wuzeyitiyeda", son of the same father. Still, I have been hesitant to try my luck again, having "dined out" so long on this incidental success as an assistant rain maker.

A rain maker like Cakereda does not command *Va*, he is simply respected by Va. In case of drought, Va usually withholds rain for some specific transgression, sometimes lack of attention by the *ndemeva*. The success of the rain maker thus depends on the respect he can generate from *Va*; the commentary on my initial "success" was revealing: *Va*, being himself more or less a white man, has respected the white man's presence in the ritual, appreciating his attention.

In the rain hunt the notion that the obstacles against rain should be eliminated is even more evident. The wind is stilled in many of the ritual instances, as wind is seen as the rival of the rains: "The wind has to stop before the rains can come". Almost all villages have some caverns, crevices that have to be filled up, to quell the winds.

When the wind is taken care of in the ritual, one other stumbling block for rain may surface: an ill-willing individual. During a drought, especially during the first dry spell within the rainy season, tales and whispers abound of people who stop the rain (van Beek 1994). Any rain maker, according to most Kapsiki, has the power to stop the rains. For our rain maker of Gouria a simple ritual would suffice:

> On a large flint he smears a mixture of beans and ochre, with a tail feather of a rooster. Then a rainbow appears in the sky, stopping rain. A positive reason to stop rain, might be when too much is falling. The *ndemeva* then mixes ashes from his fireplace, with some melon seeds and grains of finger millet (Pennicetum), which he puts on the place of honor in his compound. To have the rains return he sacrifices the blood of a rooster with some ashes on his rain jar.

According to this rain maker, he cannot stop the rain for longer than five days; after that, *Va* would overrule him. Thus, the central notion is of rain as a normal, but vulnerable asset, a boon that comes when nothing impedes. Rain makers have to merit respect, rituals have to be performed, and individual people should not try to make a quick buck with unsubstantiated claims or blackmail their village with substantiated ones. The rain situation is fraught with problems, difficulties, sometimes disasters. Rain can go wrong; if it is not wrong, it is "normal". Rains should come in time, in their expected and needed quantities, and ending in their due season. Anything less that that is not "normal" and a problem. So, in this Kapsiki definition of the rain situation there is no optimalisation, no "doing better than usual", no "bumper year".

The embodiment of this common good, the connection with rain, is in fact the symbol of power; it is the true, real and direct line to Gudur that counts. The center of power is the center of the rain, as well as the center of harm to the crops (locusts and other insects). The center of well being is the center of threat. The most powerful rain makers are the ones closest to Gudur: apart from Gudur and Sukur themselves, these are Wula and Tlukwu. The former being a "brother village" of Sukur, very closely related indeed, the latter case is different and revealing.

> Tlukwu is the village of death, the village where during the wet season in a series of interconnected village rituals "death" or rather "the epidemic" (both personalized in Kapsiki cosmology) is sent to. Following the general direction of the rains, the villages in the East start with a ritual in which "bad things" are sent off towards the West, to Tlukwu (van Beek 1977:295). Their western neighbors pick it up, sending epidemics to the next western neighbor. Arriving eventually in Tlukwu, the "bad things" are sent farther west, until it is gone with the wind.

Whence the close association of Tlukwu with death is not clear at all; the association of Gudur and Sukur with power on the other hand are of long standing and bear some fascinating historic dimensions (van

Beek 1988, Kirk-Greene 1958, Mohammadou 1988). In all three cases, power and rain go together, but also in all three the primal power base is not the control of rain, but control over another power source. Power over rain implies power over people. In both instances, Gudur or the negation of Gudur by Hwempetla, a stable rain making power is based on other power bases. In the case of Gudur it is an ancient theocratic realm (Seignobos 1991, Jouaux 1991), where political dominance was expressed in many ways, i.a. in the control of crickets and plagues; in the case of Sukur a domination on the basis of iron production (Kirk-Greene 1956, 1960, Sassoon 1964, Vaughan 1964, van Beek 1989). The story of Hwempetla, with its many variants both in Mogodé and elsewhere (van Beek 1978, 1982b) centers on the deliverance of a village from the payment of tribute, in fact on an internal war between Kapsiki villages (van Beek 1987, Otterbein 1968). All other cases of rain making or rain stopping individual claims were incidental, contested and short lived. So, the power over rain seems to be a derived one, dependent on or at least co-varying with power over people.

Inversely, the connection with rain might serve as an expression for power over men. Speaking about rain, interpersonal relations always seem to be close. So, the discourse over rain reads as a discourse on power. This discourse does not seem to be specific for the part of Africa, but also for larger regions on the continent. In fact, the clearest expression of the rain-power connection, is to be found in South Sudan, where the chief or king also is a rainmaker (Simonse 1992), and where his life is at stake when rain rituals fail. Other examples are easy to find (van Beek 2000, Jacobsson-Widding 1990)
This association does render the notion of power, at least the efficacy of power, dependent on external forces, rain, drought and other ecological pressures. Locusts are among these as well; e.g. in the case of the Cameroonian Gudur, where the chief, who is in principle the paramount ritual center of the Mandara region, commands locust plagues. Also other animals are linked with this kind of ritual power as well, such as leopards - a very wide spread association with power, one of the perennial symbols (van Binsbergen) and scorpions

This very dependency, as well as the notion of limitedness of rain and the good it can bring about, may be read as an expression for the dissolution of power, the absence of hegemony. In Kapsiki political organisation two tendencies show: centralisation of an externally based authority, and individual autonomy. (Similar tendencies were noticed by Simonse in Southern Sudan (Simonse 1992). Each village has and has had for a long time, their own *maze meleme*, village chief.. Throughout colonial and post-colonial history the tendency towards a limited centralization of poverty is clear. The (post)colonial administration for a long time has burdened but also boosted the chief's position with many tasks and duties, from urging people to be present at official functions to judging disputes and imposing fines. This does tie in with notions of the mythical chiefs of the village, but it especially fits in with the powers attributed to the central places of ritual and secular power in the mountains: Gudur and Sukur, which are beyond the Kapsiki territory. It is from these places that most Kapsiki villages trace their descent, it is there that protection against catastrophic threats (locusts e.g.) may be gained. So administrative centralization in fact did fit in well with notions of power sources external to the Kapsiki region.

Sacred power holds, thus, two aspects, a constructive and a corrective one. Power and rain are interdependent and people depend on the ways power holders relate to the spiritual world. The earthly power depends on a proper relation with the spirit world in order to be effective, and the main thrust of power holders will be one of keeping the correct rituals at the right times. The other side of the coin is the corrective element. Both rain makers and other sacred chiefs use their powers to direct environmental dangers towards wayward individuals: sending scorpions, leopards or locusts to punish their subordinate people. My impression is that these examples are from small scale societies with low levels of centralization; village communities, and small ethnic units without a intricate political system of several echelons; it is model of the priest-king who has a limited array of activities in political and social life. Usually he does not judge cases, or if so, his role as a judge is limited and depends more on verbal prowess and personality than on his position as such. In other words, the function has charisma, but lacks in power.

## 4. Two locals notions of personal power

The notions of power on the local level, though varyin g of course, do show some consistencies. I will use here two examples, Kapsiki and Dogon. Kapsiki notions of power center round the terms "berete" and "merhe". The first is physical strength: the power one has in one's body: a real "za" (man) has "berete" and is not afraid to show it. The second term, "merhe" means chief, and is sometimes used for chieftaincy, dominion. In Bible translations it is used for the power of God; in actual Kapsiki parlance it is seldom used as a generic term, almost always as a personal attribute of people who have a certain position. In fact, only the chief has "merhe". Both terms have corollaries. "Berete" is contrasted with "rhere", which means "thief". Using power, force is legitimate, but stealing things is not. When someone takes an object from someone else "by force", he is simply stronger, which is to be commended. Stealing is hidden, infringing on privacy (very important in Kapsiki) and quite wrong, inexcusable. Another antipode of "power" is a central notion of the Kapsiki,, "ntsehwele", cunning, cleverness, trickery. "Ntsehwele" is a way to circumvent power, both "merhe" and "berete"; in the folk tales it is the ground squirrel, who is his exploits against the leopard is always the weaker one, but very clever: he ever tricks his strong-but-dumb opponent into disaster.

Dogon notions of power are "gono" and "panga". The latter one has the more physical connotations, force, power, but here some social element is discernible as well. Someone with a position of authority is considered to have more "panga". The first, "gono", is the power to crate, to make things happen[1]. This too has a social element, an important one, as is the power of convincing others to agree with what one is doing, the power to get a consensus conform with one's own opinion. Central in this is the very Mande notion of the 'word' ("so"): someone who knows the word can make things happen. Knowing the "aduno so", the word of the world, means that one understands the world and can manipulate. It also implies resignation if no change is possible. One needs intellect to know that, but the word mainly used for intellect is not of Dogon origin, "hakilè". The Kapsiki express their resignation by "kanewe le ntsu", just looking with the eyes; the Dogon by speaking words.

Common in the two is the fact that power is bound to a person, an attribute of personality first and of position later. The distinction between physical force and social dominance is made, but the border between the two aspects is fluid. What is also common is the reaction against power: either as looking for mazes in the net (Kapsiki cunning) or as redefining the world with words (Dogon) the choice is between avoiding power and simply accepting it. Power is someone else. So negotiation with power is not an option, either not possible or not viable. Subjects of power are not part of a power system, hanging on one side of a power balance, as they are not defined as part of the power and the power does not depend on them. There is no exchange in power. One crucial reaction is distrust: power is never trusted, never liked. The classical African defensive reaction, of course, is recourse to the witchcraft discourse, but that is a double edged sword which cuts both the powerful and the powerless. But it is surely a discourse which links secular power with the world of religion. Finally, throughout African power definitions runs a kinship discourse, which might be the dominant African paradigm in linking local power definitions with national power systems.

## 5. African models of power

As a first experiment I want to pose here some basic models of African Power, based upon a few crucial criteria. The notions underlying the models are

- power as indivisible
- power as a personal attribute
- power as property
- the relevance of the kinship discourse
- power as coming from the outside

[1] The notion of "nyama", often used in Dogon ethnography is a Bambara word that is used in Dogon mainly to indicate decay and corruption.

Those notions stem from local political systems and are in varying was and combinations relevant for the national political theatres.

### *5.1. The pater familias*

This first model is based upon the kinship discourse, more than any else. In this model the central figure, usually a president, is "hors jeu" of the national politics, running the government through personalized links with parties, after establishing a fund of general acceptance and personal charisma.. He aims at generating consensus, even if his own voice counts a lot. Examples are the president of Mali, Touré, and his predecessor Konaré (now heading the African Union). But also the former president Ahidjo of Cameroon was reported to run his government as an old time Fulbe chief, as a father in a large extended family. Personal status helps here: Kenyatta in Kenya might be an example, as is Nelson Mandela; but his charisma has reached almost mythical proportions. Political parties are important as a rallying force for the elections and a way to link the government with the general population. But there is no real opposition, the leaders of the various parties aim at agreement more than debate; elections can run very smoothly and the cheer number of political parties, often highly personalized, gives the impression of a very divided country, while in practice this is not the case.
A subtype might be the "***negotiator***": a type of president which has less public presence. He tries to negotiate between internal political parties, and especially between his country and donor countries. He is one of the least visible of power types (not especially a bad thing!) and has transformed the kinship discourse into an economic discourse. Botswana and Burkina Faso might be examples.

### *5.2. The elephant*
Johannes Fabian reported a revealing incident on the division of a chicken in Zaire; the Congolese remark was "le pouvoir se mange entier", power eats whole. The elephant is the symbol for power as he eats everything: whoever eats much has power. This fits in with the "politics of the belly" as described for Cameroon by Bayart. The president – often "president for life", but political life can be shorter than the human span of years – is the "eat-all", the great digester. He is the embodiment of the whole nation; he is ruthless against adversaries, disposes of justice as he see fit. In the worst case scenario his exertion of power is capricious and very visible; ruthlessness and cruelty are not hidden. Parties are either non-existent, or one nominal party exists.
Examples are disconcertingly easy to find. The most extravagant example might be Jean Bedel Bakassa (the First). The former self-styled emperor of Central Africa. I was in North Cameroon during his reign when the atrocities and repression in the country were already quite clear. So I was astonished at the level of adoration Bokassa received in Cameroon. Printed cloth with his portrait was very popular, and people spoke with great admiration about him. He was seen as a hero of decolonization, ironic considering his huge dependency on French symbolism (as "empereur"), his emotional attachment to de Gaulle (whom he called "papa") and his factual domination by France under Giscard. His generation has spawned more "elephants": Mobutu in Congo, Nguéma in Equatorial Guinea, Amin Dada in Uganda. Their reign never lasted throughout their life, though some have enjoyed an "exile doré". Bokassa was disposed by France (ridiculously easy, in fact) and ended as a self-proclaimed thirteenth apostle of Christ, a telling example of the conflation of power and sanctity. All left their countries in great debt, proof of the adagio that one politician cannot build a country, but surely can destroy it. They ate it.

### *5.3. The owner*
Power as a personal attribute and governance as a personal property is found in many rulers and ruling systems, also the elephant. It is dominant in the type of the owner. Two subtypes may be discernible. The first of that of the "***liberation hero***", the one who has liberated the country. He is the Father of the Fatherland in a very literal fashion, having wresting dominion from the former colonizer. At present Robert Mugabe is the clearest example, as is Sam Nujoma from Namibia (the two are close friends). Other examples are easy to find, especially in Southern Africa. They inherited a land with a secular state, a governance by law and on the whole a functioning infrastructure. They do not abolish parliament, but dominate it, on the claim that the country is "theirs", by rightful conquest. The multiple party system is easily dominated by the party that fought the independence struggle. How

much Sankara of Burkina Faso fits this description is debatable, but the notion of revolution is crucial in this model. Their first appearance is greeted with great enthusiasm, and they do retain a considerable following at grass roots level, even when they might accumulate dictatorial characteristics.
The second subtype is the "***Grand Old Man***", the Father of the independent state. They are the liberators of old, often without the fierce struggle which characterized the independence of the front line states. Nkrumah, Houphouet Boigny and Senghor are the obvious examples of this type. They dominated politics before and after the '60s, often for life. Such a president cannot envisage his country without their presence, and neither can the country. The president owns the country and the country owns him.

There seem to be both a temporal and a geographical conscription of these power types. The first type of the Pater Familias and the more recent form of the negotiator seems to occur in the Sudan/Sahel zones Africa's northern and Southern part, in countries with few natural resources, and independence histories without too much violence. The elephant model is the clearest: it belongs to the central African region: a "forest phenomenon"? It also belongs to a time frame: Bokassa, Amin Dada and Nguema all were born in the early '20s, and gained their power in the direct aftermath of decolonization: late '60s and '70s. The liberation hero is linked to the Southern African situation, and the "Grand Old Man" is easiest found in the richer South of West Africa.

Each of these types generates its own reaction at the grass roots level, and each of these types taps different discourses inside African society. Reaction to nr 1 might be clientelism, the widening of the kinship discourse; nr 2 generates distance, a low profile, and recourse to witchcraft discourses and nr 3 is met by a general feeling of powerlessness, trying recourse to law, and waiting for the demise of the owner.

## 6. Conclusion

## 7. Bibliography