TOPICS IN DEBATES ON AFRICA AND DEMOCRACY

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Discussions about democracy in Africa usually focus on post-colonial state institutions. The question whether or not processes of democratization in Africa are foreign, European induced developments and are discontinuous with local indigenous political practices is, though not entirely absent, rarely addressed. The focus in the debates is usually framed in rather general terms, for instance by denying that anything like democratic processes can be found in Africa's non-European heritages because of the lack of institutions and practices associated with parliamentary democracy. Or, on the contrary, it may be asserted that such heritages generally were or are democratic in the sense that people look(ed) for consensus, without being precise on just how consensus was or is arrived at. In-depth studies of political practices in local situations, from the viewpoint of democracy, are rare.

Problems in the current debates on Africa and democracy may be summarized as follows:[1]:
(*a*) the persistence of a controversy about the *universality* of political institutions, values and norms versus the *cultural relativism* of these;
(*b*) the *characterization* by some commentators of a certain (considered desirable) package of political institutions, values and norms as *Western*;
(*c*) the assessment of the roles of specific *African cultural aspects* from a viewpoint of conflicts, conflict resolution and the promotion of democracy;
(*d*) the *conceptualization* of central terms in research and the associated debates;
(*e*) the *difference* between *written* political rules and political *practice*; and
(*f*) the compartmentalization of research according to academic disciplinary boundaries.

At least two concepts have to be dealt with an eye on conceptual analysis: "culture" and "democracy". This must be so because many of the debates are centered on such questions as "whether democracy is a specific product of Western culture," or "whether democracy is suitable to African culture(s)" or variants of these. What "culture" and "democracy" mean, should mean or can mean is, however, not a clear-cut matter. For scientific purposes, it will not be enough to say "culture" refers to a group of people together with their habits and "democracy" to rule by common people.

In the literature, the combination of the two concepts is making things even more difficult. For instance, David Held's classic (1987) provides profound analyses of different manifestations of what is called democracy, but it is confined to European and North-American historical developments. (Consider for instance ancient Indian republics, which are very well comparable to classical Athens but are not discussed - see e.g. Sharma 1968; Misra 1976.)

For an African instantation of research about "culture and democarcy" a look may be taken at the political role of spirit mediums in Southern Africa. As becomes clear from literature produced during colonial times in Zimbabwe, spirit mediums did play a role influencing the appointment of chiefs who represented the colonial authorities, resulting in the appointment of individual chiefs more or less acceptable to the local population. According to David Lan

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[1] Cf. Hesseling (2006).

(1985), spirit mediums played a crucial role during the liberation guerilla war in Zimbabwe before 1980.

During trance sessions, spirit mediums are able to make statements about political processes believed to be deriving from dead chiefs who speak through their mediums. Spirit mediums themselves, however, are usually not members of chiefly lineages but often from commoner families. It seems that spirit mediums provide something of a voice of, and for, the common people (cf. Lesley Sharp (1999: 14)). Despite these indications that spirit mediums play important political roles amidst and on behalf of commoners, there is little systematic analysis available in the literature about just what this means for the theory of democracy in Africa.

THE CONCEPT OF "CULTURE" AND DEMOCRACY

The concept of "culture" plays a significant role in the concerned debates. One can read, for instance, sentences like "A constitution should mirror the history and culture of a society" (d'Engelbronner-Kolff 1998: 69). "Culture," however, has been notoriously difficult to define and delineate in a way satisfactory for a majority of social scientists, specifically anthropologists. This could be viewed as problematic: If it is not clear what a culture is, then how could one establish methods for constitutions to mirror their respective cultures?

A classical approach is the cultural relativism as proposed by e.g. Herskovits (1972: 38): the best descriptions and explanations of a culture are provided, in principal straightforwardly, by the terms, ideas and assertions of the concerned culture, and not by the terms, ideas and assertions of other cultures. Later deconstructionist approaches go further and question the possibility of straightforward theorizing using "culture". Critical judgments made by extern observers are explicitly condemned (cf. Rosaldo 1987: 83). Deconstructionism shares with cultural relativism the idea that external observers should be reluctant to apply "foreign" terms that are thought to be culture-specific or have no specificity at all.

A full exposé of the semantic approach proposed in the present research cannot be given here, but it contains the following aspects:
(*a*) ethnographic terms may have *denotative* capacities despite the absence of uniform definitions for them;
(*b*) there is no straightforward *deductive* relationship between the term "culture" and other terms, however, there may exist relationships of *association* between them;
(*c*) some ethnographic terms may appear as *tool* of analysis as well as *object* of analysis.
(It can be noted that inspiration for this approach is partially drawn from mathematical semantics as employed in so-called "non-well-founded sets", cf. Aczel 1988, as well as ideas developed in Van Dokkum 2005. See Appendix below.)

This is relevant for the study of culture and democracy. Democracy is often seen as a Western invention (e.g. Akkerman 1997: 2) and therefore one might be inclined to argue that the term "democracy" should not be used to analyze political processes outside Euro-American societies. The present research, however, assumes less importance to the question as to whether the term "democracy" is deductively derivable from African cultures, but uses it as a means to denote practices in encountered in field work, these denotations being subject to certain theoretical delineations. Instead of saying that culture determines practices, it will be said that practices may be associated with culture, or that culture informs practices, while recognizing that people – participants as well as external observers - can treat those practices as objects of reflection.

In general, the idea that democracy or other desirable political institutions are specifically Western acquirements seems to be a recurrent topic in the debates. Africa is then judged critically; take for example the following quote of Emeka Anyaoku (in Buijtenhuijs and Rijnierse 1993: 5): "I do not know of any African language whose political lexicon includes the concept of a 'leader of the loyal opposition.' Instead there is a clear concept of a political enemy." We can ask here, Does the indigenous absence of a term really indicate the *absence of the object* the term intends to describe? Lansiné Kaba (1986: 100-101) mentions that in the Songhay Empire (15th-16th century) "the Muslim intelligentsia [had] the right to express their views, and to criticize the acts of the crown without fear of punishment." Such criticism could positively influence minority rights in the empire. Kaba adds that this influence was not the "voice of opposition," but with the word "loyal" added it seems to me that the combination of criticism and the simultaneous recognition of the crown's power position is aptly described by the term "loyal opposition." This, I think, holds just as well even if the inhabitants of the Songhay empire themselves had no compact phrase for it in their language(s).

Here we see an advantage of not adhering to a strict cultural relativistic framework, in which we would be obliged to use terms of the Songhay empire itself. By relaxing this obligation we open up more possibilities for comparing different historically and geographically socio-cultural entities. With reference to question (*e*) above, it may be said that research on democracy in Africa can include studies on political *practice* in the field, apart from what happens to be formalized in written documents and/or perhaps in oral traditions.

One way to do this is to focus not only on the (non)existence of indigenous terminology but on how people individually and collectively *act* and in addition to this, how political phenomena - yet to be identified - *operate* in relation to each other and to people. For the analysis of democracy, this means that we should be able to formulate certain *constraints* on the identified acts and operations in order to consider them "democratic".

One proposed definition is that "[d]emocracy means a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule" (see Held 1987: 2). This definition does not limit itself to certain geographical areas or historical traditions. The phrase "in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies" however, leads to confusion, since countries like the Netherlands are considered to be a monarchy as well as a democracy. This indicates that a broader application of the term "democracy" is more widely accepted than the definition suggests.

As a first constraint I propose that democracy entails at least the situation that power does not emanate unambiguously from only one source. A first formal implication of this is that democracy will somehow know aspects of *intransitivity*. A power relation is said to be *transitive* when in the situation that if A holds power over B and B over C, then A holds power over C. If, however, C might have power over A, even if A holds power over B and B over C, then the power relation is said to be intransitive. Dictatorships are characterized by transitive power relations: If A is more powerful than B, and B is more powerful than C, then A is more powerful than C.

As a second constraint, I propose to say that "democracy" means that political roles know few or no restrictions as to the people who may aspire to take up these roles. Positions or roles within power relations that know a certain endurance we may call *offices* (e.g. "king"; "civil servant"). Formally, one can say that research about democracy requires investigating the

extensionality of social categories regarding those offices. For instance, iut may be stipulated that for a researched political system to be democratic, the political offices within that system should be open to a range of individuals as wide as possible, and not only to members of certain families or classes in an *a priori* way.

This leads to the possibility of establishing culturally informed ways of democracy. A researcher can record the interactions of certain people and see if these interactions are interpretable in terms of the mentioned constraints concerning democracy. Separately from this evaluation by the researcher, the people can be asked about their opinions concerning these constraints.

SPIRIT MEDIUMS, CHIEFS AND POLICIAL RELATIONS

Some Southern African communities know or have known chiefs who inherit(ed) their political positions through the lineages they belong(ed) to, but were dependent on spirit mediums for legitimacy. Specifically Shona communities are a case in point. (For references on spirit mediumship, see e.g. Bourdillon 1974; Doeleman 1990; Fontein 2004; Fry 1976; Garbett 1966; Gelfand 1974; Lan 1985.) The existing literature
on the Shona indicates that chiefs' inheritance rules were such that across generations, different family branches were in turn entitled to a chiefly position. Due to age differences that inevitably emerge over the years, confusion may arise as to who should be, at the death of a chief, this chief's successor. This is a moment at which spirit mediums play a crucial role. They are, within their area of spiritual jurisdiction, entitled to appoint the new chief from competing candidates.

This entitlement to appoint chiefs is connected to the belief that the spirit mediums represent the spirit of a deceased chief. Spirits, it is believed, may speak through their respective mediums by means of trance sessions, using the human bodies of the mediums as a vehicle (through possession) to express opinions on current situations. The spirit mediums, though they represent ancient chiefs, are not themselves chiefs or relatives of the chiefly lineage they interfere with. Often they are commoners. Though their status as a medium has to be established through a series of tests by a committee, their legitimacy as a medium depends decisively on popular support. Since spirit mediums usually have several opportunities to appoint chiefs during their (the mediums') lifetime (chiefs tend to be rather old due to the succession system), this popular support can be conceived to have an influence on the chiefs who are actually appointed.

In this sense, we may speak of an intransitive (with respect to domination relations) compound of relationships in the triangle

chiefs → population → spirit mediums (→ chiefs).

Questions such as the following can be investigated:
(*a*) *how* this formation of relationships works out to provide "checks and balances" against possible authoritarian rule by the formal power holders (the chiefs);
(*b*) the extent to which people can effectively aspire to hold certain offices within the studied political system (such as chiefs and spirit mediums); and
(*c*) the extent to which the political configuration helps to distribute the fulfilment of individual and collective desires for which socio-political interaction is necessary. Besides this, it may be investigated

(*d*) how people *evaluate* the offices and power relationships;
(*e*) what people think about its relevance for application in the present and the future, specifically
(*f*) in relationship to the national state structure.

The relationship between commoners, spirit mediums and chiefs may be summarized as in figure 1:
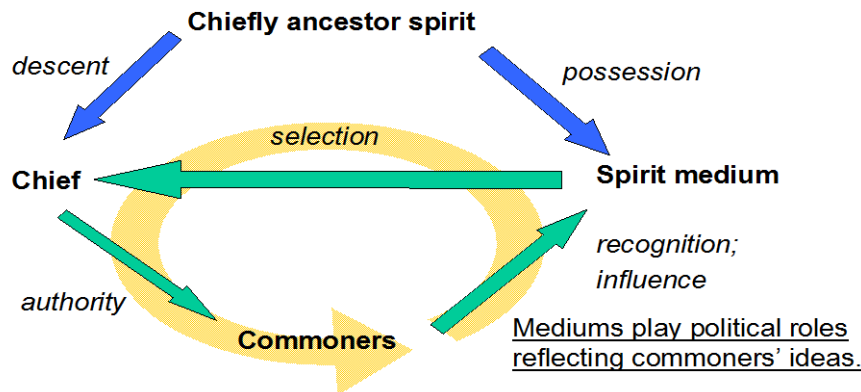

Figure 1: Intransitivity in political relations in Shona (upper triangle cf. Lan 1985: 59, lower triangle added cf. this presentation)

PROPOSED RESEARCH IN MOZAMBIQUE

A research in Mozambique is proposed. The research aims to provide for new insights in the debates about democracy, "traditional" authorities and national state institutions in Africa in general and Mozambique in particular. In Mozambique "traditional" authorities are now formally recognised but the functioning of such authorities is not systematically scrutinised concerning aspects of democracy. The research intends to provide answers to the question as to what could be understood by "recognizing" certain authorities if the official goal is also to promote democracy.
The insights obtained from the research could certainly be used to better understand local refractions of 'democracy' and political communication, and be of specific relevance to donor policies on 'good governance', and to NGO programmes geared to strengthen local decentralization and capacity-building in post-conflict countries.

APPENDIX: ETHNOGRAPHY AND NON-WELL-FOUNDED SETS

In standard Zermelo-Fraenkel set-theory, sets may include other sets, and those included sets yet other sets, and so on, but for any set there there is only a finite downward chain of inclusion to elements that can lo further be decomposed. For instance the set S = {{*b*}, *a*} includes the sets {*b*} and *a*, and {*b*} includes *b*, but the elements *a* and *b* cannot further be decomposed. S is *well-founded*.

In non-well-founded sets, the requirement of finite chains of inclusion does not exist. So the following non-well-founded sets are possible, amongst many others:

(1) T = {T};

(2) T = {U}, U = {T};

(3) T = {U, *a*}, U = {V, *b*}, V = {T, *c*}.

An *ordered pair* P = <S, T> is defined as

P = <S, T> = {S, {S, T}}.

An *ethnography* may be represented as an ordered pair of a set of concepts of the ethnographer and a set of ethnographic referents to which the concepts of the ethnographer are intended to apply. The ethnographic referents can be applicable to the set of ethnographic referents itself, and thus constitutes a non-well-founded set. The same may hold for the set of concepts of the ethnographer. The ethnography as an ordered pair by consequence also constitutes a non-well-founded set. This summarizes but also expands *into one and the same framework*, classical cultural relativism (cultures as sets of ethnographic referents should describe themselves) as well as deconstructionism (the concepts of the ethnographer are subject of self-reflexive scrutiny).

Associated with the non-well-founded ethnography is the circumstance that structuralist explanations (dependent on well-foundedness) of socio-cultural phenomena will only be feasible in certain isolated cases. On the other hand the approach circumvents the "crisis of representation" of deconstructionism because the difference between observer and observed is not of fundamental discriminatory importance.

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