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**“African Political Systems Revisited.” Workshop
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**AFRICAN POLITICAL SYSTEMS
REVISITED. WORKSHOP ORGANISED
BY THE MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY, HALLE, 10–11
SEPTEMBER 2015**

Petr Skalník

The volume *African Political Systems* (APS) was published in 1940 and has since been widely recognised as a founding text for a new subdiscipline, political anthropology. It was edited by Malinowski's students, the subsequently famous social anthropologists Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, while the foreword was written by another British structural functionalist, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, an intellectual peer of Malinowski. Even though the heydays of structural functionalism are long over, the influence of the book, containing eight chapters based on field research data from tribal polities throughout the British colonial empire in Africa, cannot be underestimated. Until today it is one of the most quoted books on Africa and on social anthropology. This probably has prompted Günther Schlee, director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, and the well-known Serbian anthropologist Aleksandar Bošković to convene an international conference on the legacy of APS seventy-five years after its first printing (there were many printings since).

There were five sessions in a two-day- workshop. After the opening remarks by the convenors, Herbert S. Lewis, a doyen of African studies in the USA and an eminent historian of anthropology, placed APS in the context of political anthropology. Aleksandar Bošković, professor of anthropology at the University of Belgrade, approached the publication of APS through the reactions it provoked in the academic community – looking at all reviews of the book published between 1940 and 1948. The next paper was given by the writer of this report, who sketched theoretical developments in political anthropology since APS, that culminated in the publication of *The Early State* in 1978 (edited by Claessen and Skalník) and called for a new approach to the

political anthropology of Africa, in which a more central place would be awarded to the work of Russian and African theorists, thus far not sufficiently recognised within Western studies of Africa.

Eric Baehre from the University of Leiden highlighted the value of a comparison of politics in Africa then and now, especially of the present political scene in which “traditional” tribal politics are much less interesting than in the period of its dominance as described in APS. This did not prevent the veteran independent researcher Simon Simonse (now living in Nairobi) to talk about the structural continuity linking acephalous societies, kingship and the early state. Nauja Kleist from the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen discussed the politics of belonging among diasporas in Ghana. The Sudanese anthropologist Munzoul Assad introduced his findings about the politics and economy of the Tuareg Kinneen of Northern Darfur. Robin Palmer, an emeritus Professor at Rhodes University in South Africa, analysed the Nkandla controversy, the huge compound built presumably with public funds in Zululand by the South African president Jacob Zuma. Palmer employed APS to explain the present-day scandalous item. South African politics today were elucidated by the Brazilian anthropologist Antonádia Monteiro Borges (University of Brasília). Burkhard Schnepel from the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg compared the premodern Indian state with African polities. North Africa as a relevant region was discussed by Bertram Turner of the organizing institution, who analysed Morocco as an exception by bringing in the concept of insurrection. Markus Hoehne, an anthropologist at Leipzig University, took up patrilineal descent in northern Somalia to consider new trends in the study of African political systems. The convenors led the discussions that were both rich and varied. An edited volume is being prepared from the revised papers and the theoretical input of the convenors and editors.