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**Political Culture in Africa – the Narrative  
Foundations of Authority and Leadership.  
International Seminar at Point Sud, Bamako, Mali,  
5–9 October 2014**

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## REPORTS

### **POLITICAL CULTURE IN AFRICA – THE NARRATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR AT POINT SUD, BAMAKO, MALI, 5-9 OCTOBER 2014**

Petr Skalník

Point Sud, founded in 1997, is an African-European network coordinating international research in local knowledge ([www.pointsud.org](http://www.pointsud.org)). Financed by international donors, among them the German Research Foundation (DFG), it promotes research cooperation between Europe and Africa. It organizes seminars in various African countries on topics which have proven to be relevant for today's Africa. The seminar on political culture in 2014 enabled a thorough discussion on the political culture in Africa among the invited scholars based in Africa and Europe. The organizers were Elísio Macamo of the University of Basle and Georg Klute of the University of Bayreuth. Klute, together with the late Trutz von Trotha, recently directed DFG funded research on 'African Political Cultures' in Guinea-Bissau, Libya, South Africa, Zambia and Ethiopia which inspired a continuation in the form of the Bamako seminar. There were 16 participants from Algeria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Switzerland and Zambia. A group of Malian PhD students also attended.

The convenors outlined the topic as a response to the failure of statehood in Africa which they see in the predatory behaviour of the elites. To some extent the seminar tackled the question 'What went wrong in Mali?' as the host country had been until recently highlighted as an example of stability and democracy. Instead predatory politics set in. In the Malian North an attempt at a state formation called Azawad documented both the differences in political culture and the 'resilience' of interventionism in the style of Francafrique. Our hotel in Bamako was not only our base but a stopover base for UN forces on their way to Gao, one of the epicentres of separatism. The Mali crisis alone is

enough of a reason for re-thinking legitimacy, authority and leadership in the whole of Africa. The study of political culture as narratives of political actors might contribute to correcting the shortcomings of African political research. Basing themselves on the research on German political culture (esp. Herz), the convenors established the priority of the study of political elites, their interpretation of political events, especially conflict discourses. They therefore advocated an actor-centred approach which, however, does not ignore the local and regional elites and transnational influences. Following Kaarsholm, Macamo and Klute's call for the study of 'the modes of functioning of political culture', especially in micro-political spaces where traditional authority, disputes between generations and genders, cultural styles and moral orientations profile best.

The seminar was introduced by G. Klute's keynote address in which he explained why cultural factors are so important for the understanding of African politics. In another paper he clarified the notion of heterarchy (as opposed to hierarchy) which is a crucial tool in the research on parastatal formations versus existing state regimes in Africa. The study of political culture puts less emphasis on the state as a paramount and more on the interplay of various forms of politics where the state is only the first among equals. P. Skalník spoke about political culture in Ghana in the same vein. Various conflicts among populations with and without chiefs, especially in the North of the country, suggest that the modern Ghanaian state is unable to exercise its sovereignty over its entire territory. Besides, the quest for chieftainship and 'traditional independence' is very popular among the originally chiefless peoples. Centralized polities indulge in a succession of conflicts which indicate that chiefs in Ghana are important political actors who should get official recognition. T. Hüsken of the University of Lucerne spoke about the old-new importance of Bedouin tribal politics in the Egypt-Libya borderland.

B. Engels of the Free University Berlin in her keynote address described the study of African political cultures from the viewpoint of political science. J. Schubert of the University of Halle introduced the new political culture of Angola which is characterized by 'o sistema' of neo-authoritarian politics, full of patronage, fear and coercion. D. Badi of CNPRA in Algiers explained local leadership among the 169 tribal Tuareg authorities. Some like Sanusi have evolved from a tribe

to the monarchic state. N. Simutanyi of the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Lusaka described the Zambian political culture as a combination of neo-patrimonial and non-violent features which explains the 50 coup-less years of relative stability. A. Sounaye of Niger who works in Berlin's Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) introduced the political culture of Niger where Islam decisively influences politics. According to him people of Niger fear coups which they consider to have been too many, they face radical secularism but also Islamification.

E. Macamo in his keynote paper discussed Weberian concepts of authority in opposition to domination and asked how people claim legitimacy, obedience and submission. R. Fernandes of INEP at Bissau pictured a variety of politico-cultural features in Guinea-Bissau. He advocated the 'palaver tree method', i.e. listening to local and national discourses at funerals, meetings, elections, rituals, carnivals. He contrasted the national narrative of the liberation struggle (Cabral) with his research of traditions in the Bijagós archipelago. One of the most exciting papers was read by I. Dougnon of the University of Bamako. He analyzed the present Malian crises as a consequence of what he called 'démocratie de façade' during the last two decades. He claimed that the culturalisation of democracy and decentralization did not stop Tuareg rebellion! Eventually Malians lost interest in the state which was seen as corrupt, but corruption was 'democratized', meaning it spread everywhere. E. Uzar, a PhD. student from Basle, analyzed critically the leadership within trade unionism in Zambia while the seasoned researcher of Zambia, J. Gould of Helsinki University, criticized the 'iron cage' of political theory in Africa and called for the unpacking of neo-patrimonialism and an actor-centred approach.

I enjoyed listening to two groups of students who presented their discussions with ordinary people about Mali's present and future. In a preparatory session, Klute and Macamo prepared the students methodologically to do research on Mali's 'basic narrative' (v. Trotha), i.e. that kind of historical construction in a society which comprises the dominant legitimate construction of the past and which is never uncontested. They showed that symbols of independence can be used by both democrats and opponents, while in truth it is not said that Mali and the country is not actually prepared for democracy. What is stronger is 'moicratie' or 'yéércratie' which stress the rule of the individual or the family but not the people or country. The final general

discussion centred again on Mali's problems. Some said that there may be a nominally democracy in Mali but governance is bad. Others pointed out that 'Sudanese', or southerners, rule instead of Malians. Religion should be divorced from politics.

The seminar was a resounding success and it was agreed that a small editorial group will prepare a book for publication.