The origins of African Kingdoms*

The problem of the origins of African kingdoms is closely linked to the general theoretical problem of state formation. Various writers' views of the processes of state formation have influenced the writing of African history while, on the other hand, the conquest theory of the state has often been supported with African material. (See, for example, Meinhof, 1912: 2; Jones, 1961: 61; Ratzel, 1898: 111, 152; Oppenheimer, 1914: *passim.*) It has been widely held that most of the states of Africa were formed by conquests by which peoples of one culture subjugated peoples of other cultures, producing societies with sharply divided classes of rulers and subjects. (For a recent statement of this position see Oliver and Fage, 1962: 46.) This paper suggests that the conquest hypothesis over-simplified the processes of state formation and of African political history and presents a number of alternative ways by which African states have been formed.

We must make an initial distinction between "primary" or "pristine" and "secondary" or "derived" states (Fried, 1960: 713), because they may come about in different ways. Primary states are ones which arise without the stimulus of other preexisting states, through processes of internal or regional development. Such states developed in the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia, China, Peru, and Mexico, but seem empirically to be relatively rare. However, given the presence of one


1. We shall not deal with the origins of the symbolic trappings of these kingdoms—the royal insignia, the forms of obeisance, the mythical charters—but with the foundation of monarchies, with rulers, administrators, and subjects. It is necessary to separate these two aspects of African kingship, at least in the initial stages of study, because the mechanisms which spread them, and their specific histories, may be different.
kingdom in a region it is most likely that it will give rise to others, and it is demonstrable that the vast majority of Asian and European kingdoms arose in response to stimuli from previously established states. It is probable also that most of the kingdoms of Sub-Saharan Africa were secondary states. The question now is, in what ways do states give rise to others?

The commonest way in which monarchy is spread is through simple geographical extension of the borders of a kingdom. This involves some conquest, but it is different from that envisaged by conquest theorists. It can involve an expansion of agriculturalists to control other agriculturalists of similar ethnic background and level of culture, as when the Nupe (Nadel, 1942: 74, 76, 80, 84), Mossi (Skinner, 1957: 742), Ashanti (Fage, 1959: 96-97), Bemba (Richards, 1940: 86), Ganda (M. C. Fallers, 1960: 15-16) or other agricultural and Negro groups expanded their states to include their neighbors. Regardless of whether a state's immediate neighbors are pastoral or agricultural, sedentary or nomadic, of the same or a different linguistic background, it is virtually certain that its rulers will attempt to extend their sovereignty as far as possible. The states of Toro, Nyoro, Nkole (Taylor, 1962: 43; 18-20; 96-97), Oyo, Dahomey (Fage, 1959: 88-90; 93-95) and the empires of Mali, Songhai (Bovill, 1958: 86-87; 102-107) all managed to aggrandize themselves, expanding into contiguous areas.

Southall has also demonstrated that the extension of state domination can be accomplished through the voluntary acceptance of chiefs by non-monarchical peoples desiring the symbolic, ritual, legal, or political gains they can derive from them (1956: 181 ff.; 229-234). Winans reports this process for the Shambala of Tanganyika (1962: 2-3). In these cases no conquest is involved.

The attempt to control one's neighbors often produces reactions and results which were unintended by the rulers of the expanding states. In many cases, the kings' representatives in newly won areas seek their own independent power. If a governor or vassal is able he may defy the king, set himself up as ruler in his own area, and then try to defeat the army sent against him. If he wins, a new kingdom is created and the new ruler, in his turn, will begin on a series of expeditions to collect tribute and bring new lands and people into his realm. Toro became independent of Nyoro in this manner (Taylor, 1962: 43). In Nupe, governors and generals in outlying areas constantly threatened to become independent (Nadel, 1942: 121-122), and several Mossi kingdoms were founded in this manner (Skinner, 1957: 742). Among the Ngoni, according to Barnes (1955), there was a continual growth of new small states as dependent chiefs gathered their own followers, took over new lands, and became independent rulers. Richards points out that the tendency for royal chiefs to declare their independence
was a major cause of the proliferation of little kingdoms in the Soga, Haya, Nyamwezi, and Sukuma areas as well as in South Africa (1961: 143-144).

In another type of unanticipated consequence, states which collect tribute and try to control their neighbors may stimulate them to rebellion and to develop their own strong leaders and complex organization in order to withstand the attacks of the monarchy. The foundations of Ashanti (Rattray, 1929: 72-76) and Dahomey (Fage, 1961: 72) and, possibly of Nupe (Nadel, 1942: 73-75), are examples of this type of development. The Ashanti Union arose as a confederation of largely independent communities joined together to fight Denkyira. They drew upon Denkyira and other states for the model of their system, but the development of the monarchy was precipitated by the rewards from and the need for war organization, which led to control by an indigenous leader. It is probable that many states began in this way but it may be difficult to tell from the literature whether historical traditions mirror secession and development inspired from above (by a vassal ruler) or a more fully local development. The Nupe and Mossi cases could be of either type.

In a related case, the Basuto kingdom was formed when a number of local groups and refugees in need of protection from the Zulu and Swazi states banded together around the leadership of Moshesh (Richards, 1961: 136).

Another common type of state formation involves military victories and losses, but again on a local scale. In areas of dense population, closed resources, possibly a nearby strong kingdom, where there is a rich reward for war in terms of land, cattle, or the control of trade routes (and tolls), local groups may begin to wage serious wars among themselves, under the direction of war leaders. Frequently these groups are of the same linguistic and cultural background. In time one may come to dominate its neighbors and a small state will develop. (It is possible that the origins of some primary states may be explained through processes such as these.) Sometimes such kingdoms continue to expand to considerable size and strength. The classic example is Shaka's Zulu state (Gluckman, 1940: 25-26) but Buganda (according to Richards, 1961: 136), the Swazi state (Kuper, 1947: 11-14) and possibly some Soga groups (L. A. Fallers, 1955: 35-37) may have developed in much the same way.

In Ethiopia, the Galla developed at least three and probably seven different kingdoms in this manner. Galla leaders defeated their rivals and new kingdoms were born at the edge of Abyssinia and Kafa (Lewis, 1964, 1965: ch. 11). (The older kingdoms served as models, and their pressure added to the need for warfare, and so these are still secondary states rather than primary ones.) In the light of much
African historical writing, it is important to note that no Galla kingdoms arose from the conquest of indigenous agricultural populations. Many writers have considered the Galla to be the archetype of the conquering pastoral Hamite (e.g. Roscoe, 1924: 13; Johnston, 1902: 588-589, 600-601; Seligman 1930: 158). But these Ethiopian Galla were sedentary mixed agriculturalists; they did not develop their states until two hundred years after they had taken over their territories in western Ethiopia, and they took their land from other Cushitic-speaking peoples. (This supports Fried's point [1961] that a people must first have developed their own indigenous power structure before a state can result from their conquest of another group.) There is no Galla kingdom with a system of stratification based on ethnicity or occupation.

Finally, there are several important kingdoms in Africa in which people with a bias for cattle rule agriculturalists. There are not many, but they have been sources of inspiration for conquest theorists from Ratzel on. In the case of the Fulani empire, however, we know that states existed in their area for hundreds of years before these partly pastoral people gained extensive political control over a number of kingdoms (Bovill, 1958: 220-232). This is probably a good indication of how the Ruanda, Burundi, and Ankole states got their Tutsi and Hima rulers. It is reasonable to assume that the Tutsi and Hima took over kingdoms which were already in existence, just as the Fulani did. Infiltrating into the area as herders (or perhaps representing the original inhabitants who were swamped by an influx of Bantu agriculturalists?) at some point they must have engineered a series of coups and taken over the kingship established by the agriculturalists. This is not the place to discuss the problem, but the prevalence of monarchy among the Bantu and its absence among the Nilotic pastoralists (and the low position of Hima herders elsewhere in the Lake District) suggest that we are not dealing with primary states of Nilotic herders over farmers. According to Vansina (personal communication) there is clear evidence that Ruanda was well established before the Tutsi revolution, and there are indications of the same thing in Burundi.

I do not claim that these are the only ways in which secondary states may be formed, and I realize that these "types" I have isolated may be combined in various ways and that it is not always clear from traditions just which processes are involved in particular cases. (M. C. Fallers illustrates some of the problems involved in her discussion of Soga history, 1960: 16). But it is clear that there is no evidence for a widespread and recurrent pattern of conquest, certainly not by members of a particular culture, a special language group, or one remarkable royal family.
The processes of secondary state formation which I have categorized here are all found in Asia and Europe as well as in Africa. We must also assume that similar processes operated in the foundations of such great states as Mali, Songhai, Kanem, Dar Fur, Wadai, and Tekrur. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the kingdoms of the Nile had a direct bearing on the development of a number of secondary states in the eastern Sudan and western Ethiopia; but once the new states were formed and new ruling groups arose, these kingdoms would have begun to extend their power, and they, in turn, would thereby have stimulated the spread of monarchy. It is unreasonable to search for the origins of the Jukun kingdom of Kororofa on the Nile (Arkell, 1961: 177), when the Jukun were in constant and immediate contact with Bornu, Zaria, and other old and well-developed states. It makes little sense to seek the origins of the Songhai or Hausa states in conquests by North African or East African immigrants when we know that the western Sudan had great empires at least several centuries before the birth of Islam.

The conquest theory of state formation is not sufficient for an understanding of the dynamics of monarchical organization and it is misleading as a hypothesis for the study of the events of African history. The kingdoms of Africa were not formed through any single process or by any one cultural, economic, or ethnic group. In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the origins of each state must be considered in its own right. When this is done a number of repetitive patterns of development are discernible. The discovery of such limited but recurrent patterns will contribute to the study of both political process and African history.

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