Tender for contribution

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NEW POWERS IN AFRICA
An Anthropological Approach to Democratization

How to explain, in cultural terms, democratization in contemporary northern as well as sub-Saharan Africa? How to describe this new political situation through an event or institution and in terms of symbolic and historical reference marks? The aim is to look beyond the dichotomy of state vs. “civilian society” (or vs. segmentary society) thanks to an anthropological analysis of “powers”.

The New Political Situation

“New” actors are gradually taking the place of political personnel in “single-party” countries. Technocrats from international organizations, intellectuals and teachers grouped in “clubs” (“moralist” ones in Zaire, “promotionary” ones in Senegal), returned exiles (as in Guinea) and even the politicians involved in independence are all caught up in a new situation. Unprecedented political movements (involving, for example, national conferences and the denouncement of corruption, tribalism and regionalism) are being invented. To write the history of these practices, we might inquire into the Western categories of party politics that can be used to describe what are now called multiparty system.

Religions and the Powers of the Invisible

Official religious institutions play a leading role in contemporary political trends in Africa. In Zaire and the Congo, for instance, bishops preside over “national conferences”. In situations where a multitude of political parties take shape, might the major religions not mediate aspirations for political change? Besides these “book religions” now in the front scene, there are also the not to be forgotten religious movements of a messianic, prophetic or Islamic sort, which recruit among those disinherited by modernity (e.g., new city-dwellers, Islamist engineers or Senegalese maitrisards) and furnish their followers with a political discourse. Might they, too, not help make and unmake politicians?

Current political debates in Africa are tied to religion in still another way. Rumors readily take the form of a malicious discourse that interprets conflicts, behaviors and events as aggressions through magic and witchcraft. A politician’s “force” is his capability to manage these “powers”, to pin up his enemies’ malevolent intentions. The universe of magic and religion thus has a part in defining the balance of powers in politics.

Reconstructing Identities and Memories:
Historical References Marks

Between the state and lineages, African societies have invented forms of government with countervailing powers: segmentary formations as well as chieftaincies or
city-states regulated by elective systems, through the alternation of groups of power-holders but also via social mediators, such as bards, Muslim scholars or even public opinion. These institutions can be too quickly dismissed as "precolonial". What are they really? What future do they have? What is their status in contemporary public debates? The "retraditionalization", in reaction to Marxist or nationalist denegations prevalent during the period following independence, primarily take as reference-mark the colonial period or the senses of identity advocated by army officers, colonial administrators or ethnologists. The case of Zulu in South Africa, or of the Tuareg in West Africa, can be reviewed in this light.

This special issue on democratization in Africa should analyze how the imagery from various sources (African, Western, nationalist, religion, etc.) enters into the balance of powers established between these new political actors.

Projects of contributions should reach the journal before 30 March 1993 (c/o Jean Schmitz), the manuscripts (25-30 p.) should be submitted before 30 July 1993.

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