

Reciprocity and statehood in Africa: from clientelism to cleptocracy

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Abstract There is considerable quarrel as to what extent the shape and mal-functioning of contemporary African states can be attributed to the colonial experience or whether the precolonial heritage must be taken into account. Generally, the correct answer is that both, precolonial forms of political organization and the imposition of the colonial state, characterize the African situation. Yet, it is possible to distinguish more specifically between the two formative influences and to gauge their particular importance. Empirically, the result of the colonial encounter was, on the one hand, a subversion of traditional concepts of legitimacy and, on the other hand, still is the fact that the development of market economies and liberal democracies remains unlikely. Theoretically, I propose to use the notion of reciprocity to describe and analyze three historical forms of power relations, namely, clientelism, colonialism and cleptocracy. By reconstructing the historicity and malleability of the concept, I try to show its usefulness and adequacy to outline basic features of societal organization.

Keywords Africa · Statehood · Reciprocity · Clientelism · Colonialism · Corruption

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1 Introduction

There is no doubt that African statehood is mainly a legacy of European colonialism. It is wrong, however, to assume that there were absolutely no beginnings of African statehood before the Europeans conquered the continent as late as the nineteenth century. And there is considerable quarrel surrounding the question as to what extent the shape and malfunctioning of contemporary African states can be attributed to the colonial experience or whether the precolonial heritage must be taken into account (Young 1994; Herbst 2000). Of course, both, precolonial forms of political organization and the imposition of the colonial state, characterize the modern African state. Yet, it is possible to distinguish more specifically between the two formative influences, to gauge their particular importance and to describe their intermingling. It shall be shown that colonialism only brought about a partial modernization or transfiguration of precolonial forms of political organization. The transfiguration was blocked, inasmuch as most contemporary African states at least empirically cannot be seen as states in the Western sense of the term, i.e., as sovereign, self-sustaining, formal entities above or apart from civil society (Jackson 1990). The result of the colonial transfiguration was, in fact, on the one hand, a subversion and destruction of traditional concepts of political legitimacy and, on the other hand, still is the fact that the final development of market economies and liberal democracies remains unlikely.

My aim is neither to blame colonialism or the alleged resistance of Africans to modernization for the deplorable situation Africa is in, nor is it to postulate that the Western road to, and Western form of, statehood is the only way history could have taken, but to explain why African states and their political actors are in a way torn apart by a legacy they cannot overcome and a destiny they did not choose, yet struggle to follow.

Of course, it is impossible to say, whether Africans had invented forms of political organization that resemble liberal capitalist states. It is a fact, however, that many precolonial African societies of the nineteenth century were not at all historically frozen and ultra-traditional. In contrast, in some parts of the continent not only incremental, but also profound, systematic political change was under way (Lonsdale 1981). In East Africa, e.g., that is within and around the Great Lakes region, of what today is Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, kingdoms or monarchies developed and prospered, which the first Europeans described as feudal (Chrétien 2003, Chap. 3). Feudal or not, these were early states which were held together and organized not by kinship bonds but by institutionally autonomous, clientelistic forms of government and culture (Claessen and Skalník 1978). Maybe these early states could have one day become territorially defined units in which, to paraphrase Weber's (1980, p. 29) definition of the state, a central power supported by an administrative apparatus legitimately monopolized the use of force. Ironically, however, even in these East African cases in which the European colonialists endeavored not to interfere with local African politics and not to visibly impose their foreign rule, but instead to support and instrumentalize the indigenous political structures for their basically exploitative purposes, this kind of 'indirect rule' led to a subversion and perversion rather than to

a strengthening of African statehood. Sticking to the East African example, the questions thus to be raised are, firstly, how much precolonial clientelism can or must be considered as precolonial statehood, and, secondly, why the colonial 'use' of clientelism failed to realize the colonial project of state foundation. I deem the choice of the East African example, of societies where protostatal structures already existed when colonialism entered the stage, as appropriate, because for a start, one should expect the change colonialism brought about not to be as deep as where no such adaptive advantages existed. That this is obviously not the case, that there was no smooth transition, hints at the fundamental impact colonialism had on African societies, even if the postcolonial malaise of African states has roots that reach farther down in history than to the colonial situation.

Theoretically, I propose to use the notion of reciprocity to describe and analyze three historical forms of African power relations, namely, clientelism, colonialism and cleptocracy. I assume the usefulness and adequacy of reciprocity to outline basic features of societal organization and shall conversely try to reconstruct the historicity and malleability of the concept itself.

2 Clientelism

There are not only different types of states but also different paths to statehood (Balandier 1967, Chap. 6; Sanderson 1995, pp. 68–86). One common way to found or create a state has been the conquest of foreign territory and the durable submission of the conquered population, as in the European scramble for Africa. Other 'methods' have been the endogenous development of bureaucratic structures for managing irrigation schemes as in the great river valleys, or the establishment and durable institutionalization of ruling classes through the domination of trade. Likewise, clientelism can lead to and has led to statehood (Hess 1977). Like trade, clientelism is an exchange relation, of parts. However, it has nothing to do with (controlling) barter or market exchange. The East African early states were clientelistic states, but in the Great Lakes region there were at least no internally important markets prior to the advent of Arab and colonial merchants (Gray and Birmingham 1970, Chaps. 3, 5). The manifold exchange relations that nevertheless subsisted were forms of reciprocity and redistribution.

What contrasts reciprocity and its derivatives from barter or so-called rational exchange is, in the first place, that it is not primarily concerned with the exchange of things or services but with the establishment of social relations that might be used for secondary purposes such as barter (Mauss 1950, pp. 258–279). Only once such a relation or an agreement on further peaceful interaction has come into being, does it become possible to trade, to deal or to negotiate. In a sense, barter is the outcome of an evolution of reciprocity. But since reciprocity first of all fulfills a social and not an economic function, since it constitutes and stabilizes social relations instead of limiting social contacts to the preparation and execution of barter, it is, in the second place, the opposite of an exchange of equivalents, as ideally embodied in monetary transactions (Sahlins 1972, Chap. 6). As much as reciprocity constitutes a kind of equality between different actors, it negates the exact equivalence of the exchanged

objects or deeds. Where equivalence reigns, debts can be cancelled. Reciprocity, however, assures and indicates that the members of a group stay indebted to each other. Unlike barter, reciprocity is a universal kind of exchange, which either constitutes the social matrix proper or frames and, at least indirectly, legitimizes spheres of selfish action.

The theoretical advantage of explaining the process of state building by reciprocity is that the explanation inherently contains an element of legitimacy (Trotha 1994a). The problem or the challenge of such an explanation is, however, that it has to reconcile reciprocity, as a kind of basic or horizontal legitimacy, with the fact that within states or state-like structures, where power relations become permanent, what must be legitimized is precisely the vertical dimension of domination, i.e., the inequality between the rulers and their subjects.

I assume that reciprocity is one of the fundamental mechanisms of creating legitimacy as active acceptance of a given social order, since it is the reciprocal constitution and acknowledgment of actors as actors, of entities being equally able to act be they individuals or collectivities. In fact the concepts of legitimacy and reciprocity shed light on each other. Legitimacy means the belief that an existing social order is justified or even just. No social order will last due to its sheer existence. A rational choice or exchange theorist would claim that an order is justified as long as its members gain from each other, i.e., as long as there are benefits for everyone. Legitimacy is thus conceptualized as an implicit contract (Hirschman 1970, Chap. 7). I do not doubt that, in the long run, all members of a society must subjectively profit from their 'membership'. Many actions, however, that contribute to the stability of a social system are not explicitly motivated; they are not calculated exchanges of limited support against measurable benefits, they are mere routines that do cost something, but cannot directly be converted into gains (Cohen 1988). Normally, it is the order as such, the condition in which we live, as the situation we know, which we actively, although not forcedly in an outspoken manner, stabilize and thereby value as long as we conform to its standards. Legitimacy is not necessarily, and empirically generally not, the result of purposive action, but rather the unintended though accepted outcome of routinized behavior. Legitimacy hints at something like an 'esteemed surplus value' of societal order. Yet, this exactly is the primacy of social relations over their secondary usefulness, as in reciprocity.

One understands why all traditional societies strictly insist on reciprocity. Indeed, all societies practice reciprocity. Reciprocity's visibility in modern Western societies, however, is weak, for it seems to be the rational calculated exchange that rules the day. But it is not only the visibility of reciprocity, but also its forms and derivative functions that vary along the course of history (Algazi et al. 2003; Komter 1996; Osteen 2002). Clientelism is one of its forms which, historically at least in precolonial East Africa, enabled and enacted the transfiguration of horizontal into vertical reciprocity and thereby the foundation of states (Lemarchand and Legg 1972; Mair 1962). Through clientelism, East African historical actors accumulated, on the one hand, the coercive means to rule over people who were not their kin, to found dynasties and to institutionalize a new 'class' difference between rulers and ruled. On the other hand, clientelism embraced aspects that linked it to

older forms of horizontal reciprocity, and that made the legitimacy of the new order of social inequality at any rate a possibility.

Clientelism is an asymmetric personal non-kin-relationship between a more powerful, richer patron and a weaker, less wealthy client that, at least in principle, is established voluntarily. It is a kind of instrumental friendship in which the patron cares for the well-being and protection of his client, while the client promises to support and aid his patron on demand. Although the patron is the leader and the client his follower, the relationship is one of mutual dependence. It is not the client alone who is in need of material and judicial help, of protection against his peers and other patrons, but also the not yet all-mighty patron who must count on a personal following to document, defend and enhance his power position. The amount, range and time of their reciprocal obligations are diffuse, depending on the situation and subject to change (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977). The precondition for the emergence of clientelism is the weakening and disruption of kinship ties as the oldest and historically most common form of social organization and solidarity. The ordinary forms of subsistence must come under strain, physical violence must be a constant threat and exit options like migrations must be blocked.

These conditions seem to have prevailed in the Great Lakes region during the seventeenth century. Probably caused by climatic shifts, the social ecology of this already densely populated area came out of balance (Robertshaw and Taylor 2000). Herding communities, who lived alongside farming communities, were privileged. Their cattle did not suffer the same strokes as the agricultural production. Additionally, as the herders were mobile, this meant that they were able to and did move with their herds when proper land became sparse, and as nomads they were prepared to make war, whereas the farmers were tied to their soil. Farming communities collapsed, families and lineages broke down, treks of refugees wandered around and insecurity reigned. In this situation, the ownership of cattle, certainly combined with sufficient military talent and potential, became the focal point of a new, namely, clientelistic form of social organization (Heusch 1966). The political clientelism that proliferated from the seventeenth century onward and formed the bedrock of the developing East African statehood had its origins in cows being given from rich and already powerful herders to their less well-off peers, who for their part obliged themselves to henceforth serve and follow their benefactors (Vansina 2004, pp. 23–38).

One should note here that clientelism reestablished reciprocity firstly between the new lords and not between this new stratum of cattle owning rulers and their farming subjects. Reciprocity still had its place in the horizontal dimension. This reciprocity, on the one hand, assured the rulers of their legitimacy, i.e., they reciprocally acknowledged and accepted their clientelistic policy as appropriate. On the other hand, however, clientelism tends to reinforce itself and to promote ever more powerful patrons to the top. The basic mechanism is that an enlarged following of clients—who independently compete for the goodwill of their patrons—raises the chances of violently appropriating further cattle and other assets, which can be used to attract and subordinate new clients. Surely, there will also be violent clashes between, and elimination contests among, the new elite, as Elias (1982) depicted in early modern Europe, but even without these, clientelism

has the in-built, twofold tendency to enlarge its range and to reduce the number of equally powerful patrons down to one. In fact, everywhere in the Great Lakes region, the European explorers, missionaries and colonialists, that penetrated the region in the second half of the nineteenth century, encountered big chiefs they did not hesitate to call kings. These kings, or their dynasties, had, at least nominally, appropriated the entire cattle and land of their respective kingdoms, ruled and administered their realm by giving, or rather lending and retrieving, parts of their property to their noble clients, sometimes commanded standing armies and also figured as the religious leaders of their people (Newbury 2001).

Two aspects of this development must be underlined. Firstly, asymmetric bonds of reciprocity seized significant parts of the population. Clientelistic relationships intermingled with older and surviving forms of reciprocity between individuals, families and lineages (Trouwborst 1961, 1962). There was, however, a hierarchy of clientship ties and, what is more, there existed an established and more or less permeable barrier between the ruling class and its subjects, even if being a client's patron did not necessarily mean to be superior to the client's peers. Secondly, the king was a king of all his subjects. Of course, either his dynasty belonged to the ruling class or he was chosen from it, and, in addition, his room for maneuvers vis-à-vis the aristocracy and its competing factions was limited. Nevertheless, he possessed spiritual authority and embodied the unity of the kingdom. His fortune guaranteed the well-being of the country. Should he fail, he would be dethroned and killed. In Rwanda and Burundi, one of his most important functions was the annual celebration of a ritual that ensured the enduring fertility of the land (Newbury 1992, Chap. 12). Even the cattle keeping, work-despising aristocracy knew about its dependence on agricultural labor and produce and thus accepted representatives of the lower farming strata as ritual specialists. In a way, the king united an otherwise clearly 'classified' society.

Both aspects, the ubiquity and pervasiveness of clientelism and the substitution of a new religious and cultural identity for earlier and less far reaching kinship-based identities, had the effect of verticalizing reciprocity. Although it would be a misunderstanding to assume that reciprocity and hierarchy are mutually exclusive concepts, the emerging protostatal order created formerly unknown levels of inequality (Lemarchand and Legg 1972). Without the reformulation of old and the development of new forms of legitimacy the perpetuation and crystallization of power would have been impossible; both happened. Reciprocity, however centralized and biased, still figured as the central theme of the myths and ritual of early states, and the advent of kingship was regularly accompanied by an elaborate sacralization of power (Heusch 1962). Indeed, the new inequality was not always experienced as illegitimate or unjust. The opposite could have been, and certainly for parts of the period before the arrival of European colonialists was, the case. But the religious kingship ideology had the effect of culturalizing belonging. And the clientelistic verticalization of reciprocity had advantages for the clients too, as it ideally functioned as basic insurance against subsistence crises and external threats, as patrons acted as councils, brokers and solicitors on behalf of their clients, and as the multiplicity of client relationships as well as the implicit norms of reciprocity figured as limits of lordly arbitrariness.

This is not to say that the precolonial East African protostates were islands of harmony in which the lords treated their subjects decently and in which a veil of ignorance made the subjects conversely believe that only their lords were able to bring peace and prosperity. Often, especially in late nineteenth century Rwanda, the rule of the lords was harsh and extremely violent, up to the extent that civil, or 'ethnic', wars were impending (Botte 1982; Vansina 2004, pp. 180–195). The point to be made here is that the early states of the Great Lakes region can be characterized as oscillating between a regress and degeneration into violence-prone conditions of feudal racketeering, on the one hand, and a maturation and stabilization of new forms of reciprocity and legitimacy, on the other hand. These societies were trying to find and hold a precarious balance that could easily be tipped to one side or another.

3 Colonialism

It was colonialism which revolutionized power relations and introduced the idea and formal structures of modern statehood, but practically subverted its substantiation. Counterfactually, it might have been otherwise, if colonialism had lasted significantly longer than it did, empirically, though, the colonial foundation and rooting of modern statehood in Africa failed due to inner contradictions of the endeavor. Basically, the contradiction consisted in the fact that the only chance the colonialists had in erecting and maintaining the colonial state was to extend existing, or presumably existing, political structures, but thereby to prevent or to block the development of a modern state with a rational bureaucracy at its center. Instead of framing, depoliticizing and replacing reciprocity by general, abstract, depersonalized principles of administration, already the colonial, and not only the postcolonial, state fell prey to clientelistic misuse. The traditional clientelism lost its at least potential legitimacy, and the colonial state never achieved it.

Although—as I would maintain—the European powers fully colonized Africa rather involuntarily and accidentally, once the dynamics of inner European rivalry was set into motion, there was no way back but to demarcate the claims and to forge them into political entities that served the interests of the metropolitan states (Herbst 2000, Chap. 3). Thus, although there was no big and coherent colonial project, the project of the colonial state was to establish an administrative machinery that could assure the domination and exploitation of the colony.

Even where there was active African resistance against the European conquest, the grabbing of the continent occurred astonishingly quickly. But that does not mean that the subjected populations simply accepted their defeat. In contrast, it was harsh physical violence which made the European presence and their commands a reality to adapt to and deal with (Trotha 1994b, pp. 39–44). The military invincibility of the European colonizers and their African mercenaries was proven in countless 'penal expeditions' to 'pacify' the conquered territories and to oblige the Africans to obey the European orders. Property was raided and destroyed, settlements were pillaged, 'rebellious elements' were persecuted and severely punished. Men, women and even children were massacred to set a deterring example. Even where local political

authorities welcomed the colonizers and hoped to strengthen their power by cooperating with them, as happened in Rwanda (Nsengimana 2003, pp. 318–366), the ordinary people had to suffer and saw and felt the Europeans as cruel unpredictable, illegitimate intruders. One immediate but long-lasting and momentous result of the colonial rage was the destruction of trust in consorting with the political power holders. Not reliability but arbitrariness characterized the behavior of the new masters.

Indeed neither empirically nor ideally was the emerging colonial state a modern state, i.e., a replication of the metropolitan model (Comaroff 2002). The rule of law, the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers and a rational, economically disinterested bureaucracy that proceeds and decides independently of the whim of the rulers, as well as of the identity and status of its petitioners, not to mention the guarantee of and respect for civil rights and democratic participation figured at best as regulative ideas that one day in the far future might perhaps become reality, but for the time being were irrelevant concepts. The colonial state corresponded rather to Europe's absolutist states of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, which, in fact, had bureaucratic ambitions but nevertheless remained patrimonial (Callaghy 1984). The absolutist monarch, like the colonial state, nominally had intentions to uniformly rule its territory from the center and to substitute its formally educated competent and loyal delegates for the personal and idiosyncratic rule of local lords. However, the realities of an insufficient infrastructure, the cultural multiplicity of the state and the weight of tradition forced the absolutist monarchs and their chancellors and clerks to take their limited authority into account, to rely on ancient practices and personnel and to use force where compliance could not be achieved otherwise. It was in this way that the colonialists chose, and had to choose, to rule their colonies. The largesse of lands to be administered and the vanishingly low number of European officials made indirect rule a necessity. Yet, the experience of an easy conquest and the belief in their natural and cultural superiority let it seem a reasonable possibility.

Indirect rule was no British specialty (Mamdani 1996). All colonial powers had, according to the circumstances and to different degrees, to bank upon the help of African middlemen. In those regions of Africa where there were politically centralized communities headed by chiefs or even kings, the colonizers regularly sought and found their cooperation. Where segmentary and acephalous societies prevailed, chiefs were invented and enthroned (Ranger 1983). It was the firm conviction of most colonial officials and of most early ethnographers of the continent, that Africans, since times immemorial, lived in, and felt themselves as belonging to, distinct tribes, and that these tribes had leaders. In fact tribes or ethnic groups did exist, but these did not provide the only and necessarily most important collective identity people had. Who and what 'a precolonial African' was, depended pretty much on the context and was much less fixed than the European imagined (Southall 1970). Also, acephalous societies were a precolonial African normalcy and regularly showed firm resistance against the establishment and institutionalization of political authority. Generally, states were the historical exception. Nevertheless, the colonial introduction of chieftainship was not considered to be a political innovation, but a restoration of the natural order of things. However in all

truth, it was as revolutionary as the endogenous development of clientelistic protostates was extraordinary. Thus, even if there existed early African states, this does not signify that colonialism left their political structures intact. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the European support for the kings meant that these could significantly strengthen their power and extractive capacities, while at the same time becoming visibly dependent on European consent (Lemarchand 1977).

Paradoxically, the putative retraditionalization of Africa, the installation of allegedly ancient forms of government, by which the colonialists hoped to heal the ravages their arrival had caused, continued and aggravated the social upheaval and disorder they had in fact brought forward. What did come under heavy strain was the more or less delicate constellation of vertical, clientelistic reciprocity and legitimacy. As mentioned earlier, in clientelistic reciprocity there is no absolute or objective standard of just exchange, rather a diffuse and precarious, within certain unspecified but nevertheless existing limits, generally accepted balance of reciprocal flows of goods and services between patrons and clients. Any breach of these limits, for example, systematically increased demands on part of the patrons, undermined the felt justice of the relationship (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977, pp. 448–449). However, there is plenty of proofs that in the Great Lakes region the ruling class very quickly realized that the arrival and local establishment of Europeans would not overturn its rule but, in contrast, widen its accumulative potential, as long as it accepted the primacy of the white lords. In a way, the members of the East African aristocracies became the clients of their colonial patrons, and it did not take long before each side managed to manipulate the other for its own purposes.

The colonizers backed the monarch and turned his sometimes merely nominal powers into real ones, to make sure that he held his subjects in check and delivered the produce, the work force, the police and later the taxes demanded. And, as if the externally augmented burden on the lower strata did not suffice to tilt the relative balance of vertical reciprocity, the king, his men and, not to forget, his rivals and competitors seized the opportunity to raise their traditional claims (Newbury 1988, pp. 131–147). Moreover, in the same way that chiefs and tribes were invented, the 'native law', which was recorded from the hearsay of the old but newly invested authorities, became codified and hardened (Mamdani 1996, Chap. 4). Other factors which further put the clients at a disadvantage were the hierarchical ordering and streamlining of administration, as well as the territorialization of the rule. By the installation of formal and graded levels of command, the abolition of competing chiefs, and the establishment of international and district boundaries, the former possibilities of clients to soften or even to evade the demands and orders of the political authorities were severely restricted (Trotha 1994b, pp. 262–294).

Thus, although the relationship between clients and their patrons deteriorated and lost its traditional legitimacy, the clients were forced, now more than ever, to seek the shelter of powerful men and mediators. The colonial state was and throughout its existence remained a coercive, unpredictable and potentially violent entity, against all its claims to strictly follow general rules. It was a perverse effect of colonialism that it backed and even reinforced the clientelistic structure, while at the same time undermining its former content. As agents by the grace of European colonialists,

African rulers became more powerful and less reliable than they had ever been. The traditional, 'feudal' exchange of obedience against protection became a deal between the colonialists and Africa's big men and left the peasantry, to a large degree, devoid of help. The deal the Europeans demanded for either not overthrowing the traditional lords, or for installing neo-traditional ones, was that African leaders switched their loyalty from supporting their local clients to serving their new patrons. The Europeans in turn were desperately in need of African collaborators without which the colonial domination would have collapsed rather quickly. Thus, instead of terming the colonial practice of domination indirect rule, one should call it 'mediated rule', in order to underline the mediators' increase of power (Trotha 1994b, pp. 294–334). This increase, however, went hand in hand with a decrease of its legitimacy.

This loss was exacerbated by the fact that the new-old second rank African power holders successively gave up, or redefined, their cultural belonging (Vidal 1991, pp. 19–44). They imitated a European way of life, often traveling or even moving to the capital. They adopted, or at least experimented with the adoption of the Christian creed (Linden and Linden 1977, Chap. 7). They, or their children, went to school and learned about the cultural superiority and impressive deeds of the conquerors. They became involved in business activities, earned money and stored riches in formerly unknown quantities. All of this more or less openly devalued the local culture and fundamentally upset the societal structure. The African king as a religious leader, as guarantor of the prosperity, pride and unity of his people, became a folkloristic, sometimes ridiculous figure (Nsengimana 2003, pp. 490–519). That he was visibly treated and thus became seen as a European pawn, and not the embodiment of strength and autonomy, was a severe blow to the integrity of the societies in respect.

In turn, it was exactly this cultural debasement of the elite that set in motion the African reappropriation and continuation of invented traditions. Even if the African mediators of power ruled by colonial grace and were backed by the force of European weapons, they could, probably neither objectively nor subjectively, afford to completely abstain from at least trying to relegitimize their rule (Lonsdale 1994). Their strategy was to take up the invented, now scholarly taught and administratively fixed traditions of the tribe and conjure up an ethnic identity and solidarity that went, like the grip of their power, far beyond any traditional standards. They claimed to be representing ethnic groups that encompassed many more people than a group of, by definition, personal clients. Their responsibility vis-à-vis their ethnic brethren thus became amorphous, and it was as difficult to prove as it was easy to pretend. Nevertheless, the understandable claims on the part of the colonial subjects not to be completely forgotten, to submit to a state that was surely not theirs but to which there was no alternative, also had to be and were, progressively, articulated in ethnic, i.e., depersonalized, pseudo-kinship, terms. Whoever wanted, under the conditions of mediated colonial rule, to make at least not completely unlikely not to lose his political and cultural belonging, had to play and thereby substantiate the ethnic game (Ekeh 2004). What thus came into being colonially were tribes, or rather political tribalism, and not classes, although the colonial state, up to a point, doubtlessly struggled to establish capitalist structures.

The colonial state served economic ends, even if it rarely delivered the results that one was hoping for. What was undertaken, was the forced introduction of wage labor, cash crop production and money itself. The idea was that one day a self-sustaining market economy would come into being. These hopes, however, were deceived, which only propelled further political and extra-economic measures on behalf of the colonial state, in order to eventually achieve its goals (Berman 1992). In other words, despite its liberal economic ideology the colonial economy was a highly politicized one. The state was never an economically neutral institution but rather the main actor and principal profiteer of an anything but free economy. And because it had to rely on local collaborators, be it for the recruitment of labor, the cultivation of cash crops, the exploitation of mines or the levying of taxes, it became mixed with private interests, or 'patrimonialized', right from the beginning (Médard 1982). The state, rather than a nonexistent, or not yet existing, capitalist economy, became the main route for accumulation. The new-old elites nationalized, or, considering they competed in factions, ethnicized the traditional clientelism which was losing its moral significance. A crucial factor that reinforced this delegitimization and exploitation of clientelistic bonds was the monetization of personal ties. The sheer existence of money, or at least the colonially enforced usefulness of it, fostered the search for immediate gains at the expense of the establishment of, and care for, long-lasting relationships and spread the range of pseudo-clientelistic, ethnic networks. The traditionally diffused reciprocal obligations between clients and patrons could now be specified and, moreover, easily hidden from the public (Olivier de Sardan 1996). Thus, both the instrumentalization of state power for private, or ethnic, economic ends and the creeping monetization of clientelism transformed reciprocity and salvaged it for further uses.

4 Cleptocracy

Ironically, the persistence and pervasiveness of reciprocity in postcolonial African societies did not stimulate, but rather hindered the modernization of statehood. The political and economic situation postcolonial Africa is now in, i.e., its political fragmentation and economic stagnation, is mainly caused by the misalliance of neo-traditional patterns of clientelism and the remnants of colonial statehood. The postcolonial state did not manage to overcome the deficiencies of its colonial predecessor, but rather exacerbated and institutionalized its contradictions. One is tempted to say that corruption, as the so far latest 'African' form of political, or at least politically motivated, reciprocity, gained legitimacy, in as much as it undermined the relicts of colonial statehood (Ekeh 1975).

As the idea of the modern state was a European import, independence occurred to Africans rather than being the direct outcome of political struggle. Admittedly, there was anti-colonial resistance throughout colonialism and there were Africans fighting for liberation. Nevertheless, the date of independence and the way in which it eventually came about was conceded and pressed down on the colonial subjects, rather than won in battle. Given the countless bad experiences, the Africans had with the colonial state, it is not surprising that they still distrusted the state, even

after it had fallen into the hands of their countrymen. Outside of the religious, rather than political ideologies of the kingdom, there never had been any idea of a state as a community of non-kindred people that nevertheless might have and follow common interests (Leys 1965, pp. 224–226). The state was felt as repressive and not as representative. It is no wonder that after independence, the African politicians had difficulties in convincing their peoples of the opposite.

In fact, such a maneuver, if actually undertaken, in most cases was quickly, and rightly, interpreted as mere rhetoric. Constitutionally, the postcolonial states were modeled on their metropolitan counterparts, which should have meant that they became democracies. Unfortunately, however, there was no such thing as a national constituency. What existed instead were ethnic communities that competed for economic advantages and political power (Berman 1998). The power differentials within these ethnic communities were disguised and smoothed by clientelistic ties or vertical reciprocity. The first nation-wide democratic elections often had the effect of swiftly teaching the African leaders on whom to depend and to whom to be loyal. If they tried at all to broaden their electoral basis, they would, time and time again, lose the support of their ethnic 'kin', and either be forced to resign or were toppled. Democracy came to signify not rule in the name of the people but rather plundering on behalf of one's ethnic electorate. The vote became and was valued as an equivalent of accumulative power (Scott 1969).

What made matters worse is that the aspirations of the African voters were running high. During the 1960s the metropolitan states had grossly recovered from the devastations of the cold war and were beginning to expand their welfare systems. The colonies were supposed not only to politically imitate the Western states but also to catch up in economic terms. It was against these surreal standards that independence became to be measured (Eckert 2006). Since the hopes did not materialize and the promises could not be kept, the wave of military coups that swept over the continent was not generally considered, neither by the Africans themselves nor by Western observers, to abort but instead to master the transition from a colonial, semi-bureaucratic-patrimonial to a postcolonial, rational-bureaucratic form of government (Southall 1974, pp. 161–164). If any institution was deemed to stand above the ethnic factions and represent the national interest, it was the army. This expeditiously turned out to be an illusion. The military regimes either prolonged the ethnic policies of their civil predecessors or went one step further and even disregarded ethnic solidarities.

A policy both the civil and the military postcolonial governments enacted was to boost the civil service. Since the amount of resources to be easily plundered was limited and since the control of the hinterland and its people remained restricted (Hyden 1980), the rulers, while trying to fulfill the demands of their clients and/or ethnic constituencies; regularly resorted to the distributions of administrative posts and prerogatives, instead of money or material assets, and left it to the office holders to make the best of it. The growth of the bureaucracy intensified the hostility between state and society, more precisely, the hostility between the town and the countryside where the majority of the Africans lived. The inflated, largely functionless and unsupervised administration tried to increase the agricultural surplus or at least its share of the total produce, and it monopolized its national and

international marketing. The multiplication of offices as well as the political, repressive potential of the 'prebendalists' to create discomfort and stress for the peasants increased the chances of corrupt behavior not only from the side of the state officials, who tried to accumulate wealth beyond any limits, but also from the side of the peasants, who struggled to be spared from the ordeals of compliance (Lemarchand 1989).

The cold war, and the, admittedly, relatively marginal, but nevertheless existing, economic interests of the former metropolitan states to smoothly exploit the natural resources and marketing potential of the African continent, prevented harmful and effective international pressure to de-ethnicize and de-militarize politics and to fight corruption (Reno 1998, Chap. 1). The Western world was, and still is, more concerned about reliable business partners than about the state-society relationship in Africa. It thus remains to be seen how seriously the nowadays loudly proclaimed insistence on good governance as a precondition for development aid is going to be taken, since the Indians and especially the Chinese, who are not known to be ardent defenders of human rights, prepare to substitute the former colonial powers as main partners of African governments.

Although it seems clear that corruption is another form of reciprocity, it has to be made explicit where its specificity lies. Of course, I do not use the term corruption as an expression for normatively wrong or criminal behavior, even if most acts of corruption are not lawful also by African standards. The sociologically interesting question to be asked is what exactly constitutes an act or the phenomenon of corruption, why it is so commonly practiced and why there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the empirical normalcy and even legitimacy of corruption, and, on the other hand, its legal and official incrimination (Olivier de Sardan 1996). Corruption is a form of reciprocity because firstly, here, as in other cases, non-equivalent or non-equalizable goods and services, including favors, preferential treatment and willful default, are exchanged or reciprocally offered and taken, and secondly, because the acceptance of a gift or payment, within interactions and situations to which payments ideally do not belong, instills the, not necessarily specific or openly articulated, obligation on the part of the taker to reciprocate. So far, however, corruption is not fundamentally distinguished from reciprocity as such, except for the clause that there are situations in which reciprocity might not be allowed.

Essentially, corruption is a conflict of norms, namely, between the 'norm of reciprocity' that 'thou shalt give when thou hast been given' and the norm that there are either 'things' that legitimately cannot be exchanged or spheres of exchange which shall not overlap. Both norms are universal and thus always coexisting. In traditional societies one always finds either holy objects that cannot be profaned through exchange or, as regards to the exchangeability of objects, closed or restricted circles of exchange (Godelier 1996). Weapons and jewelry, for example, might not be permitted to be exchanged against food or clothing. To trade in holy objects or, say, not to deliver the bride price in the correct 'currency' would have been interpreted as indecent, or more precisely, corrupt behavior. Modern Western societies, or the economic conceptions and practices of the European colonizers for that matter, have greatly enhanced the range of market transactions

and thereby, voluntarily or not, desecrated holy objects and destroyed separate spheres of exchange.

It would be a grave mistake, however, to suppose that modern societies do not know any transaction limits and exchange prohibitions (Elwert 1987). To tear them down may be the dream of libertarian market radicals, but so far, there are, compared to traditional settings, not necessarily less but surely more abstract rules that morally and/or legally forbid to universalize the market. Justice, truth, love, grace, respect and knowledge cannot or shall not be purchased by money or converted into each other. Such exchanges do however happen, often in an incidental manner, but normally not in dimensions which encompass significant parts of or even whole societies. The European sixteenth century, however, during which it could already clearly be seen that the feudal, clientelistic order of the European middle ages was giving way to other, protocapitalistic forms of society, was a time in which there was not much respect for the moral boundaries of exchange. The fact that Europe mastered the crisis and developed the rational state and a rational form of capitalism had many contingent reasons, but essentially must be understood as an altogether successful process of functional differentiation.

Our spheres of exchange are specialized social systems, like science, religion or education. These systems are functionally independent and often use systems-specific media of communication, but they are nevertheless interdependent, in as much as, like in any social organization based on the division of labor, each system must rely on an ordinarily satisfying output from the others (Luhmann 1977). Regardless in what way one precisely conceptualizes social systems, what is clear is that the functional and institutional differentiation of the political and economic systems is fundamental for the 'integrity' of Western societies. Their backbone is the separation of the logic of the state, which must be a neutral arbiter of power above the heads and interests of its citizens, from the logic of a capitalist economy, in which individuals must be left alone to provide for their material reproduction and welfare, as long as they abide by the law. As we have seen, however, such a separation does not exist in the postcolonial African context.

Or, let us say, if it exists, it exists only formally and superficially. Empirically, the separation of political and economic roles has no real importance (Chabal and Daloz 1999). On one side of the coin is the typical misuse, or corrupt use, of state offices to improve one's private economic and political standing. Given firstly the experiences that Africans had with the colonial state as a, mainly, violent and exploiting agent, then secondly the weakness of formal education, and thirdly, the often very miserable economic conditions which even many clerks are in, their corrupt behavior, disregarding the idea of an impersonal administration, becomes understandable. There is neither an ethos of the state nor the economic premise that it might be followed. What is more, due to the ambivalence of the colonial state to, likewise, modernizing and traditionalizing African societies, there is rarely an undisputed standard or rule set to be applied to practical administrative problems. In many instances the petitioners and office holders are not sure, whether it is modern national or neo-traditional native law that must be taken into account. On the other side of the coin is the African heritage, which legitimizes, or at least normalizes, corrupt behavior (McMullan 1961). Rather than being a colonial legacy, it was instead a

common precolonial practice of actual and prospective clients to offer gifts to their lords for obtaining a favor, for getting a hearing, for being treated justly or simply for being recognized. Similarly, the widespread use and necessity of remunerated intercessors to get into contact with important and mighty people, or to negotiate a wedding, to terminate a private quarrel or to communicate with one's spirits and ancestors, was no colonial invention but a most traditional way of solving problems.

Another relevant factor for propelling corruption is the absence of universal conceptions of morality and solidarity. Africans traditionally rarely and even nowadays only seldom feel responsible for others that are not their kin, of their clan or ethnic group. The counterpart of this attitude is the indeed strong and nearly irredeemable solidarity within one's core, extended or imagined ethnic family (Ekeh 2004). Such a moral orientation is not the result of a deliberate choice but the institutionalized experience that it was the family and not any political organization or religious association on which one was able to rely. In Africa, statehood did not substitute kinship patterns of solidarity but fostered and transformed them. On the one hand, the early states used and verticalized basic and probably universal familial forms of reciprocity and distribution, which in a way dressed themselves in family-like costumes to veil the fundamental break in the evolution of social organization which the advent of statehood indeed was. On the other hand, the violent and hostile character of the state did not reduce, but rather underlined the importance of extra- and anti-statal solidarity ties. Kinship, which as such is already a social as well as biological phenomenon, became ethnicity, or rather political tribalism, i.e., as regards the number of people, a more encompassing and culturally enlarged and standardized form of imaginary kinship, that served as the basis for political and economic competition within the arena of state (Lonsdale 1994). In as much as the state itself leant on clientelistic networks and ethnic groups, it became not only the agent of special factions but also became 'infected' with an already distorted logic of reciprocity against which bureaucratic rationality had and has very slim chances of taking hold. The decontextualization of reciprocity in and by clientelism and colonialism perverted its morality and subverted the establishment of rational bureaucratic norms. The moral void of the colonially upset African societies was not and could not be filled by identification with the new state, but rather it gave way to the politicization and thus confrontation of ethnic groups that drew and continue to draw a clear distinction between the rights and obligations of us and them.

This explains not only the moral double standards that exist, depending on whether one has to deal with a member of one's own tribe or with an ethnic foreigner, but also the cleavage between the official condemnation of corruption and the factual behavior of officials. The condemnation is owed to the international public, to the big spenders that still finance a substantial percentage of the African state budgets, but also to a strategy to legitimize the corrupt practices of the power holders and to de-legitimize the, so to say, 'by definition' corrupt demands of the excluded or discriminated ethnic groups. Of course, this well-known double standard does not serve to strengthen public morals; it definitely does not figure as an incentive to respect the letter of the law (Olivier de Sardan 1996). To corrupt and to be corrupted, however, primarily is a practical necessity (Elwert 2001). The maintenance of clientelistic ties and the mobilization of ethnic solidarities function

as a replacement for the missing capacity of the state to satisfy the fundamental economic, political and cultural security needs of its citizens, and are, at the same time, the reason why the state will barely become capable of ever fulfilling them.

Certainly, there are similarities between the range and forms of corruption in sixteenth century Europe and contemporary Africa. The difference, however, seems to be that at least so far African societal corruption has become a self-stabilizing system that is blocking the way out of the economic misery as well as out of the impasse into which the state–society relationship has run. In Europe it was the reformation, a religious movement with fundamentalist traits, that helped to overcome simony, the selling of indulgencies, nepotism and other forms of corruption (Elwert 1987). In Africa, it is true that there are widespread religious revitalization movements (Ellis and ter Haar 1998). But these are far from forming a coherent whole, a ‘reformist’ ideology that could serve to ‘rationalize’ African ‘life style’ in the Weberian sense of the term.

Obviously, the stability of the African ‘corruption complex’ is due to a vicious circle between an already weak state and a booming informal economy. The blossoming of the informal economy in all postcolonial African societies is a direct result of the inefficiency and the predatory nature of the state. One tries to get along without the interference of cleptocratic clerks. The relative success of informal economic activities, however, further weakens the state; it obtains less taxes and wields less control. This in turn stimulates the administration, not least the police and the military, to transgress and once again extend the limits of its authority and become criminal. As in colonial times, the remaining coercive potential of the state is used to extract the maximum profits from an already severely impoverished population. Crime does not become legal—so far the double standards are still kept intact—but racketeering becomes the business of the state (Bayart et al. 1999). For the people corruption is the only way out. And yet, it is also the reason why there is no escape from the bandits in power.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed to use the notion of reciprocity to describe and analyze three forms of power relations in East African history, namely, clientelism, colonialism and cleptocracy.

Although states in Africa are mainly a colonial import, there are precolonial states which came into being by the verticalization and polarization of horizontal clanic reciprocity or interaction. The material basis for transforming the relations between comparatively equal clans or lineages into the subordination of peasant individuals and their families under landlords was the latter’s effective military and economic superiority, i.e., their potential to gather a group of clients. From the viewpoint of the subordinated clans, which continued to interact by means of reciprocity, the institutionalization of protostatal power seemed illegitimate. The new rulers, however, used the idea and ancient practice of reciprocity to acknowledge their right to rule among themselves and to justify their power vis-à-vis their subjects. The ‘deal’, like in feudalism, was to grant protection against

obedience. A second important factor in legitimizing the new power structure was religion, which proclaimed and defended the right of the rulers to rule but which also bound them to respect the duties of reciprocity.

Although the colonial experience was relatively short, its impact on African societies and the way in which independent African states 'underperform' was decisive. The colonial state superimposed its structures on African societies and, together with its locally recruited advisors and mediators, became the embodiment of violence and illegitimate power. In East Africa (and elsewhere) it needed and used the local power elites to rule. Whereas this 'mediated rule' partly covered the colonial violence, it did not prevent the traditional elites from maximizing and enforcing their extractive and exploitative potential and thereby revealing vertical reciprocity as a myth. Obedience was enforced, protection not granted. What is more, colonialism also meant the substitution of Christianity for traditional religion. The African elites, adopting the new creed and seizing the new possibilities of upward mobility, freed themselves from traditional behavioral restrictions and lost the religious backing of their power. Thus, colonialism destroyed the ideological and also, to a certain degree, the real content of legitimate vertical reciprocity.

A kind of vertical reciprocity did however prevail, but its form and function changed. First of all, with colonialism the clientelistic hierarchy became streamlined and centered on the state. This process raised the stakes and lowered the personal character of clientelistic policies, which henceforth stimulated the development of politicized ethnic solidarities. The African state became tribalized. Secondly, the forced introduction of money and markets led to the monetization of gift exchange and functionally to its enhanced economic and political instrumentalization within the realm of the state. Thus, the moral boundaries between gift exchange, market deals and administrative performance tended to blur. Reciprocity itself became, more and more, a rational choice either to evade economic exploitation and political repression or to make the bureaucracy work. Unfortunately, but understandably, the substitution of African leaders for colonial masters did not bring the development of a political ethos that would have allowed distinguishing between public goods and personal gains. Quite on the contrary, the violent destruction of traditional forms of legitimacy and the forced introduction of capitalism led to the universalization of a behavior that might be termed 'rational reciprocity' and which made the state a resource to be plundered. The outcome of this process is not only the banality but also the legitimacy of corruption in postcolonial Africa.

It is an irony of history that reciprocity not only facilitated the beginnings of African statehood but also hinders its modernization.

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