

To What Extent Is Neopatrimonialism the Unchanging Way in Which ‘Africa Works’?

Written by Elliot Kratt

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Neopatrimonialism is the unchanging way in which ‘Africa works’ to the extent that it has persistently characterised the way in which ‘Africa works’ since independence. However, neopatrimonialism itself is always changing in determining how different African states work, at different points in time. Neopatrimonialism is a combination of two forms of Weberian types of rule. It is a syncretic fusion of “rational-legal authority” and “patrimonial rule” (Pitcher et al., 2009, p.130; Erdmann and Engel, 2007, p.99; Matter, 2010, p.69; Bach, 2011, p.277; Chabal and Daloz, 1999, p.145). Essentially it is patrimonial practices taking place in the context of a ‘modern’ state (Hyden, 2000, p.19). These patrimonial practices involve characteristics including patronage, clientelism, rent-seeking and corruption (Médard, 2002, p.379; Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.4; Szeftel, 2007, p.427; Pitcher et al., 2009, p.129). Conversely, the rational-legal state or ‘modern’ state, is one largely defined through formal impersonal democratic institutions where there is a clear separation between public and private sectors, often exemplified in the literature as a Western state (Beresford, 2014, p.1; Pitcher et al., 2009, p.130). Under neopatrimonialism both these forms of rule are

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combined.

Neopatrimonialism derives from the political, economic and social structure devised by colonial rule and has defined African politics since independence (Lindberg, 2010, p.123; Hyden, 2000, p.18; Beresford, 2014, p.2; Erdmann and Engel, 2007, p.106). Bayart described this form of rule as the 'politics of the belly' whereby there is a "life and death" struggle (at all levels of society) to gain access to state resources referred to as the 'national cake' which is ultimately controlled by 'big men' (2009, pp.235-238). It takes different forms in different states, with some being characterised by higher levels of patrimonialism than others (Pitcher et al., 2009, pp.126-134). Neopatrimonialism also presents different impacts, in some cases it 'works' for African states and people and in some cases it doesn't, but this largely depends on the political and economic infrastructure of the state and the nature of leadership (Matter, 2010, p.69; Bach, 2011, pp.282-289). Neopatrimonialism as a concept can be applied to a number of different regime types whether they be multi-party democracies, single-party systems, personal dictatorships, "plebiscitary", or military oligarchies (Ikpe, 2009, p.682; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.472). It isn't necessarily a destructive practice and its implementation and impact have varied outcomes, in some instances it is evident that neopatrimonialism can determine a "strong economic performance" (Cammack and Kelsall, 2011, p.88).

It should be stressed that neopatrimonialism is not part of a unilinear progression from patrimonialism to Western style democratic governance or free market economics, neither is it cultural trait or a primordial and 'backwards' characteristic of the African state (Pitcher et al., 2009, p.128; Wai, 2012, p.33; Chabal and Daloz, 1999, pp.152-153). This would be an overtly Eurocentric perspective which rests on a number of assumptions that are only valid relative to European historical patterns and not to African historical patterns which have proven to sit in deep contrast to the experiences of the West (Berman, 1998, p.306; Wai, 2012, p.29). Neopatrimonialism as a concept has also been challenged on the grounds that it is a "catch-all concept" (Kelsall, 2011, p.77; Erdmann and Engel, 2007, p.104; Wai, 2012, p.31), yet such an accusation implies that neopatrimonialism is invalidated by its flexibility in analysing different political, economic and social structures in different contexts, which I consider a strength. While in many respects it could be said to have become a "ubiquitous concept" (Wai, 2012, p.28), it has also developed in clarity as more a "master concept" which can be applied to different political and socio-economic situations (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.472). In this light, continued neopatrimonial practices can become exposed as changing (exhibiting changing characteristics) in the way in which they determine how different African states work (Pitcher et al., 2009, p.126). Neopatrimonialism is not the 'unchanging' way in which 'Africa works' but a 'changing' way in which 'Africa works' although elements of continuity remain.

Corruption

A prominent characteristic deriving from a neopatrimonial political system is corruption. Corruption is the use of public powers by politicians for private ends (Clapham, 1985, p.48; Szeftel, 2007, p.427). Although "in no way unique to Africa" it has remained a characteristic persistent in how 'Africa works', but at different levels in different states (Bayart et al., 1999, p.8; Médard, 2002, p.384). It takes place through a blending of formal private and public sectors by informal personalised institutions (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.458). At the top level corruption is highlighted through using state resources for means of reproducing and entrenching political power and private wealth (Allen, 2007, p.304). Corruption of the high level sort has remained prominent as there is a great deal more incentive to do so with strong ethnic and family loyalties ingrained into African political and business sectors (Médard, 2002, p.382; Kelsall, 2008, p.644; Bayart, 2009, pp.228-232). Attempts to hinder corruption by donor reforms have proved unsuccessful (Szeftel, 2007, p.429; Bayart et al., 1999, p.19). For example, in Zambia, through donor support, the Zambian Revenue Authority was established to centralise state revenue to reduce opportunity for corruption, yet this has in fact worked to favour neopatrimonial practices as the centralisation provides "increased resources for particularist expenditure" by state elites (Soest, 2007, p.621). This demonstrates that despite institutional changes and reforms instigated by those attempting to reduce neopatrimonial characteristics such as corruption, such characteristics are only further reinforced. This implies that corruption, a symptom of neopatrimonialism (Beresford, 2014, p.1), remains unchanging in the strength of its presence in how 'Africa works'.

Corruption, despite remaining a persistent characteristic, has changed in the way in which it occurs. African political elites now use anti-corruption campaigns as a device to legitimise their own corrupt practices (Soest, 2007, p.628).

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In a democratic system (in the context of neopatrimonialism), parties will often use legal-rational justifications of anti-corruption to undermine each other's legitimacy and/or to increase their own power (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.466; Lindberg, 2010, p.134). For example, even more developmental states such as Rwanda exemplify this form of corruption with President Kagame jailing 'corrupt' government officials without a trial (Kelsall, 2008, p.643). This illustrates how persistent characteristics determined by neopatrimonialism such as corruption are in fact changing in and of themselves despite the fact that the issue of their presence is unchanged. Therefore this demonstrates that neopatrimonialism is changing in determining the way in which 'Africa works' with its persistent characteristics work in new and different ways.

Rent-Seeking

The dominant characteristic of 'corrupt' practices, in the context of neopatrimonialism, is the use of state resources for private enrichment by rent-seeking, generally understood as a predatory and anti-developmental practice (Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.4; Médard, 2002, p.381; Bayart, 2009, pp.63-76). Some states are subject to collapse by neopatrimonialism with issues of personal enrichment placed above economic investment, through centralised rent-seeking used for short term purposes rather than long term investments (Crook and Booth, 2011, p.100). Personal enrichment through corruption is not necessarily an issue in itself, it only becomes considered so when others are not sharing in the benefits of state resources as well (Cammack, 2007, p.601; Bayart, 2009, p.235). This issue of personal enrichment at the expense of the state has remained largely an unchanged feature of neopatrimonial politics in many states since independence. For example, In Zimbabwe under Mugabe, rent-seeking practices have generally been incredibly damaging and perpetuated economic underdevelopment (Kelsall, 2012, p.681), with a "46.2% drop in GDP per capita between 1998 and 2005" (Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.14). Similar cases have also occurred historically in other states such as the Central African Republic under Bokassa, Zaire under Mobutu, and Nigeria under Abacha (Bach, 2011, p.279; Kelsall, 2011, p.79). These examples suggest that across Africa, neopatrimonialism's characteristic of rent-seeking as a damaging phenomenon for personal enrichment at the expense of the state has remained an unchanged practice of neopatrimonialism in the way 'Africa works' in many contexts across space and time.

However, rent-seeking is not always purely used for purposes of private enrichment and is in some cases actually used as a force for economic development (Kelsall, 2011, pp.78-79), meaning that neopatrimonialism is a changing feature of the way 'Africa works' as it in many instances helps Africa to 'work' (Kelsall, 2012, p.678). Centralised rent-seeking reinvested into the economy, although corrupt in nature and perhaps motivated by selfish leaders in fact leads to greater economic development, and removing such practices would not be of benefit to sub-Saharan Africa (Cammack and Kelsall, 2011, p.88; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012, p.382). Some of the most successful African regimes are neopatrimonial where rents have been used for growth (Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.2). Perhaps the most significant example of developmental patrimonialism through such practices is Rwanda (Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.88). Rwanda centralises rent management and uses it in the private sector investing in its company Tri-Star (now Crystal Ventures) which invests a great deal in state infrastructure (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012, p.388; Kelsall, 2012, p.680). This has led to significant reductions in poverty showing a fall from 57% to 45% between 2005 and 2011 (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012, p.388). This shows that neopatrimonialism in some countries is a developmental force rather than a destructive one, illustrating not only heterogeneity in neopatrimonial systems across Africa with sharp contrasts between states (like Rwanda and Zimbabwe), but also changing patterns and impacts associated with persisting characteristics of neopatrimonialism in determining how 'Africa works'.

Underdevelopment

Despite specific cases showing that neopatrimonialism is developmental, there is a large body of evidence to suggest that a homogenous perspective that neopatrimonialism has changed to become developmental is flawed. Instead, it is perceived by many that neopatrimonialism is the reason for underdevelopment across African states politically and economically (Cammack, 2007, p.612; Pitcher et al., 2009, p.130). Neopatrimonialism shrinks "economic opportunities" through "exclusionary" patronage systems and clientelism while rent-seeking often has further negative effects on the economy, making it less attractive for investment (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.460; Chabal, 2009, p.126). For example, in Zimbabwe in 2004 due to a number of neopatrimonial practices, the

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amount of people living in poverty increased by 68% (Dawson and Kelsall, 2011, p.10). While in Zambia with a more "restricted" form of neopatrimonialism there was greater revenue performance with the tax-to-GDP ratio increasing from 15.3% to 18.7% (Soest, 2007, p.636). These trends not only suggest that neopatrimonialism perpetuates underdevelopment but also that the less neopatrimonialism there is, the more effectively the economy can develop. This suggests that neopatrimonialism is unchanging in the sense that underdevelopment has remained in many instances as a result of characteristics of rent-seeking, patronage systems and general use of state resource for private interest but changing in the sense that in some cases its presence is declining.

Patronage Networks and Clientelism: the Role of Ethnicity and the 'Big Men'

Furthermore, an undisputed continuity in neopatrimonial systems is the presence of patronage networks and clientelism. They are the main state-society linkage and this patron-client style politics is pervasive at all levels, twisting formal institutions for informal ends (Berman, 1998, pp.305-308; Hyden, 2000, p.19). This method of economic and political interaction allows African leaders to maintain an element of governmental control and legitimacy through reproducing it by providing benefits to clients and "patronage networks" (Allen, 2007, p.304; Chabal, 2009, p.93; Chabal and Daloz, 1999, p.161-162; Lindberg, 2010, p.128). To entrench support, patronage/clientelism takes the form of material gift giving and providing jobs often in government (Clapham, 1985, p.55; Ikpe, 2009, p.682). For example, in Zambia there was a significant expansion in the bureaucracy between 1964 and 1967, The Department of Customs and Excise grew from 280 staff members to 629 (Soest, 2007, p.699). More recently, the Zambian cabinet positions have grown from 14 positions in 1964 to 23 currently, this is most likely not necessary as most developed countries have around 15 positions (Soest, 2007, p.626). This suggests a continued trend of patronage and clientelism in determining how 'Africa works' meaning that neopatrimonialism in this case has displayed unchanging characteristics which continue to determine how the country is governed.

In addition to this, the character of patronage and clientelism in neopatrimonial political systems has remained largely unchanged, as determined by ethnicity (Erdmann and Engel, 2007, p.107). 'Big men' control patron-client relationships which are often defined ethnically due to colonial administrative heritage (Ikpe, 2009, p.685; Berman, 1998, p.308), despite the fact that African politicians often denounce 'tribalism' they persist in using such networks for political legitimacy, with links "reaching from cabinet to village" (Berman, 1998, pp.305, 334; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.459). Merit consequently plays little role in recruitment for government positions, instead ethnicity is a more important issue as this is also what determines political support and loyalty, as opposed to ideology (Hyden, 2000, p.22; Cammack, 2007, p.602). For example, in Nigeria where ethnicity has been instrumentalised to reinforce political power through clientelism and control of the 'national cake' (Ikpe, 2009, pp.683). Former president Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) was able to achieve his position by careful manipulation of the Yoruba (a large ethnic group) through patronage systems from the Alliance for Democracy (AD) party who control a significant proportion of Yoruba vote (Ikpe, 2009, p.691). This shows that despite the presence of a democratic system, neopatrimonialism is unchanged as its characteristics, in this case political positions and support through ethnicity, pervade the system of government. Therefore, this suggests that neopatrimonialism is unchanging in this respect with regard to how this particular African state 'works' as ethnicity remains a prominent issue.

Similar to patronage, clientelism and ethnicity, one neopatrimonial characteristic that remains unchanged in certain African states is that of the 'big man' *remaining* the centralised source of power, in control of the 'gate' or the 'national cake' (Cammack, 2007, p.600; Bayart, 2009, p.238), or as Berman states, "the Big Men are not coming back; they have never left" (1998, p.341). This mode of personal rule is evidence of unchanging neopatrimonialism. This is shown by presidents remaining in power for the long term through rigging elections and frequently shifting their ministers to different positions to prevent others from threatening their 'big man' status (Kelsall, 2008, p.642; Soest, 2007, p.625; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p.460). This can be seen in the case of Zambia, which has had just three presidents since independence: Kenneth Kaunda, Frederick Chiluba and Levy Mwanawasa. The average time each have spent in office is 14 years. Yet, their government ministers remain subject to short terms of around 2.4 years in office (Soest, 2007, p.625). This illustrates how neopatrimonialism is unchanged in the sense that certain characteristics associated with 'big man' politics such as long-tenure of president and short term ministers have continued to define how African politics 'works' since independence in certain states.

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The Impact of Democracy

However, although patronage and clientelism in the context of a neopatrimonial political system as a characteristic remain unchanged in their presence and the ways in which they operate (ethnically), neopatrimonialism itself has changed in that it has become exacerbated and increased with the presence of democratic institutions (Kelsall, 2011, p.77; Hyden, 2000, p.21). Neopatrimonial practices of clientelism and patronage networks define African democratic systems as they remain the unchanged means by which to attain support and loyalty, meaning that democracy does not displace patrimonialism with legal-rationalism, instead they are fused and determine neopatrimonial practices (Pitcher et al., 2009, pp.136-137; Médard, 2002, p.383; Lindberg, 2010, p.130). For example, in Ghana in 2001 patronage practices proved to be evermore significant, there were 1,078 candidates running for parliamentary seats compared to just 780 in 1996 (the last election) (Lindberg, 2010, p.130). This contributed to the presence of clientelism and the increased significance of patronage networks which account for 25% of campaign funding with around half of the MPs running spending around "two or more" annual salaries on securing their position, most of which is spent on securing political loyalties through patronage and clientelism (Lindberg, 2010, pp.131-132). This clearly shows that neopatrimonialism is not unchanging and has changed to become an increasingly prominent characteristic of determining how 'Africa works' through the increased significance of patronage and clientelism used in democratic political systems.

In spite of this, there are certain factors which imply that neopatrimonialism is in fact changing but becoming a less significant force in determining how 'Africa works' relative to democracy. African states in general have adhered (to an extent) to pushes by Western institutions such as the World Bank to become more democratic and show 'good governance' (Kelsall, 2012, p.677), which some argue is contributing to not only greater democratisation but also economic prosperity (Kelsall, 2008, pp.627-628). There is a strong incentive to become more like the West as reforming political and economic structures to suit the West attracts the financial support of donors which in turn helps to entrench this trend further (Cammack, 2007, p.599). Although there is evidence to suggest that neopatrimonial forms of government are better than the 'good governance' agenda in sparking economic growth (Crook and Booth, 2011, p.100; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012, p.382), there is "nothing in patrimonialism to prevent the creation of a democracy by leaders determined to do so" (Pitcher et al., 2009, p.149). This has meant that democratic systems have been able to change the way in which neopatrimonialism is present as a force, resulting in it becoming more of a background factor as opposed to a defining characteristic. For example, Botswana, although built on a base of patrimonial rule (Kelsall, 2008, p.641), is now a 'modern' democratic state, a multi-party democracy where the opposing political party make wins all be it, low level ones (Pitcher et al., 2009, pp.126-145). This suggests that neopatrimonialism has changed in that it has had to adapt to democratic systems, a new way in which 'Africa works' in some states.

Concluding Remarks

Neopatrimonialism in Africa is most notably characterised by heterogeneity in defining the political and economic prospects of different states in different ways at different times (Beresford, 2014, pp.3-5). It's changing or unchanging way in determining how 'Africa works' is subject to historical and contemporary context, even within a state (Berman, 1998, p.333). For example, between 1965 and 1979, Malawi had centralised rent and "long-horizon" management leading to it developing well above the sub-Saharan average. Yet, between 1980 and 1994 rent management became short-term due to Structural Adjustment Plans and led to economic decline (Cammack and Kelsall, 2011, p.89). Between 1994 and 2004 this trend got even worse under the leadership of President Bakili Muluzi with decentralised and short term rent management leading the economy into serious depletion. Under President Bingu wa Mutharika between 2004 and 2009, however, this was altered returning to centralised "long-horizon" rent management (Cammack and Kelsall, 2011, p.89). This demonstrates that Africa doesn't always 'work' under a neopatrimonial system and that such systems are ever changing, sometimes becoming more developmental and sometimes anti-developmental, largely determined by varying rent-seeking behaviours. This shows that neopatrimonialism is unchanging in its presence, but changing in its impact, depending on the leader and the context. Yet, such changes shouldn't be understood in a unilinear sense, as some form of 'progression' to a more 'modern' way in which 'Africa works' (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, pp.144-145; Wai, 2012, p.33).

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In conclusion, neopatrimonialism is the unchanging in the way in which 'Africa works' to the extent that it remains present across the African continent with persisting characteristics playing a prominent role in political and economic systems. However, neopatrimonialism is constantly changing in how 'Africa works' relative to the state, the time period, the leader and the global political and economic context, it must also be noted that this process is nonlinear. Characteristics of corruption, patronage, clientelism and rent-seeking remain prominent across neopatrimonial African states and continue to determine how each state 'works' but in changing ways.

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