

## Review - Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond

Written by Michael Jennings

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MICHAEL JENNINGS, OCT 12 2012

Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond  
Edited by: Daniel C Bach and Mamoudou Gazibo  
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For Africanists, yet another tome on neopatrimonialism raises mixed feelings. Can there be much new to say about neopatrimonialism and the African state, a state which in both academic and popular analysis has become synonymous with neopatrimonialism? Bratton and van de Walle's assertion that neopatrimonialism is a 'core' feature of African politics certainly reflects the way that it is used in explaining a whole range of ills that affect many African states. It has become a cipher for explaining failing or failed development, the hollowing-out of the state, corruption, conflict and civil strife and the facsimile of democracy and democratic institutions. Perhaps it was a mistake to have the book waiting on the desk whilst re-reading Said's *Orientalism*, for surely the concept of neopatrimonialism as applied to Africa fits comfortably within Orientalist constructions of the African state?

On the other hand, new research is raising new and interesting questions about the way neopatrimonialism is characterized, modeled, and understood in relation to the African state, and in particular about the ways that it has been popularly understood to impact on development and democratization, the twin mutually-supporting pillars of

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donor engagement with the continent.

*Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond* certainly moves beyond orthodox presentations of neopatrimonialism and the African state, but whilst it offers glimpses of new directions, new approaches, new ways of engaging with this idea at different levels and in different contexts, it does not in itself offer anything particularly new or radical in its approach, whether theoretical or empirical through the choice of case studies.

Certainly, it is not an Orientalist essentialising of the African state, but an often successful attempt to unpack this analytical tool in order to make it more meaningful and useful. Divided into three sections, the first takes a theoretical swipe at the concept of neopatrimonialism. The second section explores the theory within an African context. Finally the analysis moves onto the central task of providing a comparative analysis by considering its functioning in selected countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The first section, taken as a whole, provides a good survey of the origins of neopatrimonialism, as adapted from Weber's distinction between patrimonial and legal bureaucratic states, and how it was subsequently applied to the African state. The ways in which academic debates have fed into the policy arena also merit discussion. Daniel Bach's chapter ('Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism: comparative receptions and transcriptions', pp.25-45) discusses how neopatrimonialism came to define in much of the literature, and especially in the policy arena, 'the archetype of the African anti-developmental state' (Bach 2012. 25). Distinguishing between regulated and unregulated forms of neopatrimonial practice, Bach argues that the more casual use of the term by NGOs, donors, and other international actors engaged in sub-Saharan Africa fail to adequately take account (or even acknowledge) the ways in which different forms, practices, frameworks of neopatrimonial practice can have differing outcomes from a development perspective. One is reminded here of the work of Tim Kelsall on neopatrimonialism in Africa, which similarly makes the case for the ways in which 'neo-patrimonial governance is compatible with strong economic performance' when practice is subject to regulation and control from the centre, and when it occurs within a context of 'pro-market, pro-rural policies' (Kelsall 2011, 76). In the collection under question, however, such interesting debates are not fully followed up or empirically rooted sufficiently.

Providing a greater contextual rooting is Médard's contribution, a study of the rise and fall of Kenyan politician Charles Njonjo (pp.58-78), an edited version of a 1987 article, which is framed with Daniel Compagnon's chapter on political entrepreneurship (pp.45-57). Taken together they provide an analysis of leadership style and of what it takes to establish and maintain political power (as well as the consequences of what happens when such efforts are no longer successful). Using Weber's categories of those living 'for' or 'off' politics, the chapters together explore the 'big man' of African politics: from a generalized theoretical perspective (Compagnon) and through the narrative of one such individual (Médard).

In his main chapter, Gazibo (pp.79-89) returns to a big question: the compatibility of neopatrimonialism and democracy, and of the nature of 'hybrid regimes'. Interesting as it is, the chapter is both quite short (thus not allowing sufficient discussion), and suffers from something beyond the control of the editors and auditors: events. The as yet incomplete and still largely incoherent Arab Spring casts a shadow through its absence. Surely it would offer more interesting insight on how neopatrimonial regimes can survive (albeit in different guises, and with new constraints) democratic transitions, and how hybridity might look in different contexts than the focus on third-wave democratization (a problematic concept, in any case, for Africanist politics).

The second section begins with a broad overview of the current state of neopatrimonialism in African states (van de Walle) before narrowing down the perspective through a series of 'case studies': neopatrimonialism and warlords / rebels (Bøås and Jennings); political 'godfatherism' (i.e. those able to dominate politics and maintain influence and power through placing 'their' people into official positions) in Nigeria (Albin-Lackey); and a consideration of how neopatrimonialism functions at lower levels of power, in this case customs officers and traders in Niger (Alou). All are useful and interesting case studies allowing the concept to be explored through specific instances rather than at a more distanced, theoretical level, and in ways that complement the prior theoretical discussion. Alou's chapter in particular reminds readers of the need to look beyond central governments and national leaders / 'big men' in considering how neopatrimonialism impacts on the life of ordinary citizens in different ways.

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However the on-going neglect of the local sphere is a shame and a gap within the collection (albeit met in part by Alou). Looking to local government and the periphery for a consideration of clientalism and neopatrimonialism, and the function and activity of local elites would have complemented a growing literature on the state at the local level. Not only would it allow for analysis of the ways in which neopatrimonialism at the local level might reflect or differ from the more traditional gaze of academic literature, it also represents a missed opportunity to consider how donor and international organisation policies designed to improve governance can serve to increase neopatrimonial forms. Decentralisation reforms, coupled with vertical delivery systems (especially but not exclusively in the health sector) from international organisations and a range of non-state actors, have a profound impact on the character and extent of the state at the local level.

The case studies demonstrate the importance of context in the ways neopatrimonialism is shaped, expressed and impacts on broader society. However, there is still a sense that overall the full complexity of the state in an African context is both missed and reified. There is little consideration for traditional elites where patrimonial power without a suffix might still exist and intertwine with the workings of the state (especially at local levels), for example. The nature of the African state at all levels remains somehow absent from the narrative.

Similarly with the third section, which seeks to expand the neopatrimonial focus beyond Africa through consideration of its operation in the Philippines, Brazil, Uzbekistan, Italy and France. On the whole, the studies are rather short, lacking in deep rooted analysis, and thus fail to fully satisfy the demands for greater comparative studies. The main strength of these chapters (from the perspective of an Africanist) is to remind of the central purposes of the book: a comparative approach to the understanding of neopatrimonialism, and to rescue the term from being applied exclusively to Africa.

Nevertheless, this is a useful addition to the canon of literature on neopatrimonialism. The theory section provides a useful reminder of how the term first emerged from Weber's analysis, was subsequently adopted and refined for the specific regions subjected to that analysis, and the more recent ways in which research has reframed and asked new questions of neopatrimonialism (even if it does not fully explore these new models itself). The editors have worked hard to ensure there is a logical flow throughout the collection rather than a set of disparate, loosely connected chapters. True, it does not provide a radical new statement or perspective on neopatrimonialism. But it does seek to widen the frame of reference, and raises interesting and important questions, even if it never entirely fulfills the promise of answering them.

### References

Daniel C Bach, 'Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism: comparative receptions and transcriptions', in Daniel C Bach and Mamoudou Gazibo (eds), *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond* (Routledge, London and New York: 2012), pp.25-45

Tim Kelsall, 'Rethinking the Relationship between Neo-patrimonialism and Economic Development in Africa', *IDS Bulletin*, 42, 2 (2011), pp.76-87

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