

Reflections on the forms of socio-political organizations in pre-colonial Africa

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ABSTRACT: Precolonial African societies had their socio-political organization adapted to their culture and tradition. At the head of each, group was lead by a chief surrounded by feudatories responsible on charged to make. From civilizations of Congo Basin through those of West Africa and south, there emerged various forms of socio-political organizations, starting from smallest to largest : societies without states or chieftaincies, city-states , kingdoms and empires. This study clears the field of socio-political institutions in precolonial Africa and analyzes their mode of operation.

Keywords : Forms of Organizations, Socio-Political, Africa, Precolonial, Reflections

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I. INTRODUCTION

Africa, the cradle of humankind, remains one of the great parts of the world that has been noted by its long-forgotten history. It has shown beyond the myths and prejudices of all kinds in its history that it existed before its contact with the West, societies, civilizations, peoples and states that have structured themselves quite strongly and impressively. The history of Africa is exciting. We all know the Pharaohs of Egypt and their many magnificent tombs (the pyramids). However, we do not have enough information about the ancient kingdoms of precolonial Africa. Moreover, before the arrival of the Arabs, the kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa remain largely unknown for lack of writing. So we only know those in contact with the Middle East: the kingdoms along the Nile on the one hand, heirs of the Egyptian civilization that stretched formerly into the present Sudan. And the kingdom of Aksum on the other hand, which inherited both Judaism, Christianity, and the Sabeian civilization which forms the ancestor of present-day Ethiopia.

But the situation is changing and things are changing with the spread of Arab civilization around 750 in northern Africa. Starting from this point, the chronicles of the Arab, Sahelian and European travelers as well as the most recent archaeological digs, tell us quite clearly about the appearance of proto-states south of the Sahara and up to the tip of the continent.

In this study, we will first seek to know : what are the different forms of political organizations in pre-colonial Africa ? What are their strengths and weaknesses ?

Then, what are the different African kingdoms that distinguished themselves by relying on the specific case of the Bantu kingdoms of Central Africa ? and what about their apogee as well as their decline ?

1- The different forms of political organizations in pre-colonial Africa

History tells us that it is not with the contact of Africa and the West that it began to organize¹. On the contrary, at the end of the first millennium of our era, sub-Saharan Africa sees the emergence of the first sets organized in kingdoms, empires, and many other forms of political organization, very different from each other according to their traditions. . What makes Joseph Ki-Zerbosay :

Restitution of the lives of the African peoples living in southern Kongo and Ethiopia at this time is very difficult. Archeology is revealing amazing things and the ruins it reveals, despite the multiple depredations they

¹Z.Sah, 2016, *The African Kingdoms*, support documents for Bachelor 1 HG, Brazzaville, Marien Ngouabi University, p.2

have suffered, show powerful human groups that have organized their collective life and tried to dominate their environment².

In the form of political organization in precolonial Africa, we can distinguish :

- societies without states or chiefdoms
- city-states
- the kingdoms
- empires

-Societies without State or Chiefdoms

It is not at the same time that all African societies have organized themselves into states. Indeed, until recently, many African societies functioned without a state. We usually had small groups, extended families, lineages, villages and even cities. Thus, some of these groups could be headed by a chief (chieftaincy) who is usually chosen from the elders. The power of the latter is to enforce order in this society in relation to their cosmogony.

In this case, the functioning of society was based on discipline, respect for customs or even fear.

For example, Igbo (Nigeria) and Mbosi (Congo) constituted societies without state

- The city-states

The city-states consisted of a city, the city and surrounding territories. Here, the city was the center of political and administrative life. All the dependent territories of the city-State were the vassals of the city. But it did not control them directly because they extended over a large area.

On the whole, farmers and ranchers had to work and provide the city with a tribute (a kind of tax), mostly in kind, to feed the inhabitants of the city.

And in return for that, the city, in most cases fortified (with forts), had to take care to defend the inhabitants of these territories and to serve as refuge in case of attack by the enemy or the invaders. The example of city-states of the city-states is that of the Hausa (Kano ,Kitsina ...) in central Sudan.

- Kingdoms

In Africa, kingdoms were larger than city-states . In the kingdoms, the entire territory was under the control of the central power held by the king. The decisions taken by the king were applicable to all subjects. We also note that the institutions were the same everywhere in Africa. In operation, it must be remembered that, most often, the king appointed officials or governors to administer the different regions. The latter thus become the representatives of the king to enforce his decisions and govern.

Several African kingdoms have illustrated themselves in history through their political and administrative organization . This is the case of Kongo kingdom (Angola-Congo), Teke kingdom (Congo) in Central Africa and Mossi kingdoms (Ouagadougou) in West Africa.

- Empires

Africa has also experienced great empires. Indeed, from the seventh to the sixteenth century' vast empires were formed and had developed between the Senegal and Niger rivers. These are the Empire of Ghana, Mali and the Songhay Empire.

the first black empire known with enough precision is that of Ghana. It is thanks to the works of two Arab authors Ibn H a wkal and Al bakri , the first who traveled from Baghdad to the banks of the Niger and Awadaghost in 970, does not hesitate to say of the Emperor of Ghana " it's the richest in the world because of the gold in his possession . " Later, it is Al Bakri who, in his famous description of North Africa gives us precise details on the empire [3] .

The Empire of Ghana was formed as early as the 7th century. It was developed in-waiting of the city of Kumbi -Saleh with 20,000 residents, large commercial and intellectual center between the ^{tenth} and eleventh centuries. Around 790, the reigning dynasty belonged to the family century, of the King of Ouagadougou, Kaya-MaghanCissé.

This country is presented by some Arab authors as the country of gold, hence the name of Gold Coast (the gold coast). Among his most famous emperors, one can quote : Kaya MaghanCisse, DjambereSokhana ,Tounka Mani and TounkaBassiCisse, the king of gold .

In the eighth century, Ghana intensifies its trade with the Maghreb, which brings him an economic prosperity in him comforting in the control of the trade of gold and salt.

²J.Ki-Zerbo, 1978,*History of Black Africa*, Paris, Hatier History Collection, p.169

In the second half of the eleventh Ghana knows a beginning of collapse linked to Almoravid invasions parties Mauritania and extend their domination throughout the northwest of the continent. In the twelfth century, Ghana loses all his influence before being swallowed by the Mali Empire.

Another empire that caught the attention of Arab and European travelers is one of Mali 's' stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Niger and the edging of the Guinean forest in the Sahara. Its founder is SoundiataKeita. The Empire of Mali is the largest state-trained Western Sudan between the ^{twelfth} and sixteenth ^{century}. It was created in the twelfth ^{century} as a result of the merger of several small kingdoms Malinke located between Upper Senegal and Upper Niger.

2- strengths and weaknesses of thesesocio-politicalentities

In this register and with regard to the organization of African kingdoms and empires, we can note that in these entities, the foundation remains the social group (cultural community). This one spreads each territory to compose the provinces of the kingdom or the empire. At the level of social organization, there is the hierarchy of classes : nobles, free men and slaves. Power is monarchical in these states. In the center is the King, a central character who holds all the attributes of power. In some states, it is surrounded by a Council of State of ten to twelve members which limits its power.

3- The legacy of the African Kingdoms and Empires : case of the Bantu Kingdoms

Bantu Africa extended from southern Lake Chad to Lake Victoria. It was in this area that had deroulated the great migrations Bantu before the seventeenth century.

The Bantu formed between the seventh and nineteenth centuries several kingdoms In the west, we could distinguish the kingdoms of Kongo, Loango ,Kakongo, Tio (Anzica), N ' dongo, in the center, Kuba, Lunda and Louba . To the east Monomotapa, Changa and Sofala .

They were famous for ironwork.

- The UnitedTioorAnzique(Teke)

The first to take shape, followed by that of Kongo , who, moreover , according to tradition, modeled on him, was teke kingdom, better known in Western literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century under the not to Anzicana, or Anzico.

The Anzicana spread over the whole of south-central Congo, which he overflowed from elsewhere, to fix its western limit on eastern Gabon, while to the east, spanning the congo , he took possession of the current regions of Bandundu and Kinshasa, DRC.

The foundation of Teke Kingdom will go back to the seventh century if we rely on the hypothesis of archaeological work of the team of researchers at Omar Bongo University of Gabon [4] .

In the sixteenth century, European travelers already spoke of the kingdom as a fact very old.

Organization of the Kingdom

Kingdom of Onkoo , the all powerful king Teke, the Anzicana , is an authentic, highly centralized state . There is a strong administrative, military and legal organization, ensuring the coordination of social processes monopolization by the power of the political control apparatus. The administrative organization of the kingdom is feudal.

At the top of the social pyramid is the Onkoo , the revered king in the manner of a deity.

His powers are extended, he remains the master who has his eye on everything, on the temporary as on the spiritual.

After having reached a high level in its organization, the kingdom of Anzicana was faced with many difficulties which were going to collapse. Indeed, the appearance of a certain number of social factors, following a series of ruptures and the social metamorphoses they entail gradually weaken the Onkoo 's authority and bring out unexpected personalities from the shadows.

The enrichment of some local notables by the slave trade played in the same direction. It benefited those who were best positioned in relation to the slave market.

Later with another level in the organization of the power appeared twelve provinces administered by representatives of the king whose symbol of the power was the nkobi .

The names of these twelve administrative jurisdictions grouped around Mbé, the capital of the kingdom are : Inlinon, Muyu, Impaon, Andzion, Ampoh, Lion, Angia-Obuh, Mwangaon, Onzala, Anzobo, Mvula .Each named ancob the country. Two provincial governors remained famous : Ngaiolin and Mwidzuh .Ngailinon sitting in Nkouo , a huge district of Mbé, extended his authority over the Awun, the Ambey-Mbey, Asise and the Lali .

Mwidzuh held Abali and reigned over the Küküa ,Azynziu , Abun and the Agwengwel .

But the Onkoo remains a true divinity before which everything is bent, he is the supreme authority of the kingdom.

-The Kongo Kingdom

The Kongo kingdom had already formed in the thirteenth century, its founding date back between the sixth and eighth century. The history of the kingdom is well known from the fifteenth century, thanks to the writings of Portuguese travelers arrived in Central Africa.

The kingdom stretched from Lower Kongo to the Kouango River. It included six provinces : Mbamba, Mbata, Mpemba, Mpangu, Nsundi and Soyo.

The kingdoms of Loango, Angola and Kakongo depended on Kongo.

The king of Kongo, Mani-Kongo was all powerful and had absolute power. The heir of the king was elected by a council of notables. He was not the son of Mani-Kongo but that of his elder sister. The king, the council of notables composed generally of blacksmiths formed a caste of rich who lived thanks to the sale of ingots of iron, copper, ivory and slaves.

Oil palm , raffia weaving, elephant hunting flourished in the kingdom. The capital was M'banza-Kongo became San Salvador with the Portuguese in the ^{sixteenth} and ^{seventeenth} centuries.

Indeed in 1482 ,the Kongo kingdom was discovered by the Portuguese Diego Cao. At the beginning of the 16th century, Mani-Kongo Alfonso I was a Christian king who had renounced traditions and imitated Portugal more and more. His son Henrique was even consecrated Bishop in 1521 .

The economy was based on agriculture made possible by land clearing , and on metallurgy, which made it possible to manufacture and export iron and copper objects.

For the trade, the inhabitants of Kongo used different currencies : raffia fabrics and seashells.

The cooperation with Portugal failed because it was not able to send to Kongo the missionaries and technicians called for by the Mani-Kongo.

The successors of Alphonso I, Diego Alvarez opposed the Portuguese, who since 1580 engaged in the slave trade, thus ruining the country and abandoning their religious mission [5] . The kingdom was weakened by the slave trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From that moment, he entered a phase of decline.

-The Loango Kingdom

The Loango Kingdom ,Kongo's former maritime vassal, is the result of the anarchy that reigned in the state of Kongo. Dapper[6] related a tradition, wrote that the people of this country have lived long in small chiefdoms perpetually at war cutter each other before passing under the dominion of Kongo.

Within the limits of the Loangokingdom , live today the Vili of which descend the inhabitants of Loango. The territory then included 7 provinces : the Mâpili , the Matsilônga , the Mâkuni , the Maybebe , the Manganga, Kanu and Malwâdjili.

King Malango was chosen from among the princes born of the kingdom, provided that he was considered worthy by the council of regency (Council of Notables), which council governs the kingdom during the interregnum. Kings are caught within the matrilineal royal clan [7]. Little by little, other clans will also give kings. The court (Mikawaluangu), included the king (Ma-Loango), the ministers (Mifuka) and the notables (Sifumusi) [8] .

The judicial power was exercised by the king, the governors and the village chiefs for the civil and the criminal. The economic life was based on agricultural activities , hunting, fishing, forging, poterie, weaving, making salt by drying the water of the ocean.

From the second ^{century} XV, the main business of the kingdom of Loango like other kingdoms (Kongo , Kakongo, Anzicana ...) was the slave trade, sold to Europeans in exchange for coins.

The kingdom of Loango seems to have experienced its great period of economic activity between 1896 and 1897 [9] .

Weakened by the same causes that had led to the decline of Kongo's kingdom The slave trade whose control escapes it, the emergence of a new aristocracy that is indocile, the king can not intervene effectively. The upheaval of the traditional socio-political and sociocultural order was fatal to Loango, as it had been in Kongo[10] .

- Kingdoms of the Congo Basin (present-dayDRC)

The Kuba Kingdom

The rise of Kouba seems to be located in the second half of the ^{sixteenth} century. As soon as they were installed, the Kuba knew how to weave raffia stuffs, and melted iron and copper. A kingdom's restructuring efforts take place in the ^{seventeenth} century, during the reign of ShyaamA Mboul A Ngoong or ShambaBolongongo . It reinforces the introduction of young people to military and civic service for work of common interest, concentrates the dignitaries in the capital for better control, founds cities of prisoners of war.

After this king will come Mbombosh, MbongLengue and Bomantchala. Later, the prosperity of this state will attract the Loubainvaders.

The Louba Kingdom

It is located between the high valleys of Lomani and Lualala. One of the great king of this kingdom is Kongolo, revered as a demi-god

The Monomotapa

In their wandering south, the Bantu founded new states, the most important of which is the kingdom of Monomotapa, south of the Zambezi River. It is from the thirteenth^{century} that the first Bantu settled in this part immediately in contact with Arab counters including Sofala.

At the end of the thirteenth^{century}, a Bantu chief named Nembire installed a burly state, which undertook the conquest of neighboring countries. Thus was constituted the kingdom of the "Emperor of Gold" OrMonomotapa[11], after two hundred years of struggle and conquest.

The Monomotapa was rich in gold mines which passed for inexhaustible. He exported it to Sofala, as well as ivory and probably slaves, of which the Arabs were the traffickers.

The kingdom also had iron and copper mines; the abundance of work testifies to this.

In addition to these activities, agriculture and livestock produced cereals.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Monomotapa broke up and the Changa, his vassal was formed in the south, around the Zambezi Valley.

Apogee and decline of African kingdoms

The s XIV-XV century and the middle of the seventeenth century are mostly African kingdoms periods of political and economic hegemony. However, in some cases the splendor of the kingdom was short-lived, as many will not cross that painfully very eventful eighteenth century. One can take here the example of the kingdoms of Western Sudan, the Mossi kingdoms. The Mossi kingdoms were divided into two kingdoms, that of Yatenga in the north, around Ouahigouya, that of Ouagadougou in the south, or Natenga where the first Mossi empire was built around a king called MorhoNaba.

This is the fifteenth century these kingdoms reach their maximum power (peak).

The Mossi are therefore around the MorhoNaba a hierarchical state, very well organized.

It had a government in which each of the dignitaries or ministers had specific attributions. There were seven important ministers:

- the horse chef Or OuidiNaba, who as his title indicates commanded the lords Mossi serving in the cavalry
- the Larhalé Naba was minister of war.
- the GoungaNaba was under his command.
- the BaloumNaba was a kind of minister of the interior, who commanded the servants of the palace;
- the women of MorhoNaba were guarded by KamsaogoNaba;
- the SoréNaba led the drummers who accompanied soldiers at war or paced the day of the king at the palace.
- Finally PoéNaba was a kind of magician who pointed to the criminals to justice, by unmasking them by magical methods.

On the whole, we note the existence of organized states, some of which will strongly impress Europeans as soon as they arrive on African soil. This is also the case of the Bantu Kingdom of Kongo.

In economic terms, these kingdoms have had commercial relations. Among the Mossi for example, a track from the fifteenth century, Ouagadougou joined in Gao.

Another part of Ouagadougou, descended the course of the black Volta to go near the peoples of the forest, where they provided themselves with cola, ivory, perhaps also as slaves. By Gao, the Mossi had a contact with the big international trade. They bought fabrics, jewels, shells, salt, iron and copper. They also had their own artisans, who worked for local consumption, including blacksmiths, jewelers and weavers. Very proud of their traditions and their organization, the Mossi remained for a long time faithful to their past, since one finds again still, in their country, the survival of the great kingdom of MorhoNaba. In Burkina Faso, the Morho Naba today has a considerable moral and social influence. He is consulted at any time for questions that engage the national life.

In West Africa, prosperity is also found on the southern coast, particularly in Dahomey and Ashanti.

In Central Africa, the Bantu kingdoms are active in the iron industry, which will allow them to expand their authority and prosperity. In the sixteenth^{century}, for example, we begin to be aware of two new successful regional groupings: the Great Lakes region on the one hand, at the level of the current Rwanda-Burundi and Uganda.

The fertility of the land allows the rise of powerful kingdoms, some of which will form the embryos of the current states.

The second center of prosperity is located in Katanga. The Lubaempire may have existed as early as 1300. It led to the emergence of the Lunda empire further west in the late 16th century. These two empires will be at the origin of many other kingdoms, founded sometimes very far from the cultural heart.

In the kingdom of Kongo, the royal treasury was garnished by the royal monopoly of the exploitation by women of the shell mines, the Nzimbus, of the island of Louanda, which served as money. The common people were very industrious for example, they drew from some large fish an oil which, mixed with pitch, was used to caulk boats.

They used with great ingenuity the slaughtered elephant leathers, to make highly sought-after necklaces; they used various kinds of palm trees to draw wine, oil, vinegar, fruit ...

The internal struggles, the contact with the dominating Europeans and the paroxysm of the Atlantic slave trade constitute major obstacles to the complete development of the African kingdoms before the beginning of their total decline for some and the narrowing of their power and their space for others who have survived.

II. CONCLUSION

The great states of precolonial Africa had a good administration and were well managed as a whole. These states did not have a purely ethnic base. They were already kind of pre-nations (micro-nations).

These kingdoms of which some will know a great radiation and will be erected in great kingdoms and Empires Africans will know their apogee around the XIV^e century before weakening and declining.

The great empires and kingdoms could no longer be from the second half of the fifteenth century, as people had dispersed and had fled because of the manhunt organized by Europeans and some local leaders to capture the slaves.

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