

BOOK REVIEW

E. Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, *L'état en Afrique face à la chefferie: Le cas du Togo*. Leyde and Paris: Afrika-Studiecentrum and Editions Karthala. 2000.

Albert Trouwborst

The author of this book is well known not only for his publications in the field of legal anthropology and the study of African chiefdoms but also for his fine documentary films on the same subjects. His films and books and other publications complement each other so that it is quite natural that cross-references are regularly made.

The book gives a detailed analysis of the present situation of chieftaincy in relation to the state in Africa, especially in the case of the Republic of Togo. Van Rouveroy makes it unquestionably clear that African chiefs are still a factor of importance despite the facts that there was a time when they were severely criticised because of their collaboration with the colonial powers and their so-called feudal past and that attempts have even been made to abolish the whole institution.

Van Rouveroy insists on the fact that the institution of chieftaincy is not an unchanging age-old phenomenon but is constantly moving in what he calls a process of transformation. He sees the chief as a mediator between two entirely different worlds, but also as the person who does jobs the state cannot or does not undertake, as for instance in the case of dispute settlements and questions of sorcery. He calls him a "syncretic leader" and speaks of the multiplex character of chiefship because of the multiple roles the chief has to play.

He describes the interaction between the state and the chiefs as a "zero sum game" in which the gain of one of the parties constitutes the loss of the other. He also shows however that the state and the chiefs are dependent on each other, which may imply that both can also profit from their mutual relationship.

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These views of Rouveroy are supported by a wealth of data, obtained by interviews, work in archives, articles in the press and participation in different kinds of meetings. In writing his book he has evidently profited from his wide and longstanding experience as a fieldworker in this part of Africa. It was however not always easy for him to conduct his research, as he himself has the honesty to mention, as when he was explicitly refused access to certain kinds of information. He was not allowed for instance to be present at negotiations in Togo between the organs of the state and the chiefs (96).

In the preface to the book Trutz von Trotha points out that the book represents not only a contribution to legal anthropology but also to political sociology and the anthropology of the post-colonial state in Africa. He further points out that Van Rouveroy (74), has gone a long way from a study of African ways of settling disputes to the study of post-colonial political institutions especially as regards chieftaincy.

It is certainly true that the book owes much to Van Rouveroy's legal background and shows his familiarity with Dutch studies of adat law/folk law - he calls himself an *anthropologue de droit* (74) - as well as with later developments in American and British anthropology of law. The book can however also be considered a contribution to political studies because it concerns to a large extent competition between opposed powers. Van Rouveroy's material lends itself therefore quite well to an analysis in terms of what political anthropologists would call intercalary roles, of brokers, clients and followers, arenas, networks and encapsulation.

An example could be the position of the chiefs as middlemen and brokers. It has been said in political anthropology that a middleman often has an interest in keeping the two worlds apart. That might mean that a chief does not only and always represent the interests of the local population but first of all serves his own interests. Seen in that way there are not two but at least three worlds involved, those of the state, of the chiefs and of the local populations.

As regards the notion of the state one wonders whether the African 'state', should be understood only as part of a western colonial inheritance. Van Rouveroy himself calls the African state a *pâle copie du modèle européen* (56). In his book 'the state' is more or less treated as a monolithic given but I think that it also should be analysed in the same way as is the institution of chiefship. African states have undergone many transformations since colonial times and certainly do not conform to western bureaucratic notions of what a state ideally should be. I suggest that representatives of the state in Africa in their acts and ideas are maybe not so different from the 'traditional' African chiefs as is sometimes suggested. Van Rouveroy himself shows that the chiefs are actively engaged and know their

way in the political struggles on a national level and are certainly not the kind of a-political local administrators which would be expected in a bureaucratic structure. He also shows that the chiefs as intermediaries in the political arena have to develop carefully their own stratagems vis-à-vis the state and as such can be considered to be *hommes politiques* (105).

All these questions can no longer be considered as belonging to the domain of one single discipline. For a long time the study of African chieftaincy was more or less the monopoly of anthropologists who developed the specialisation of political anthropology mostly based on African material. This specialisation reached its high point in the sixties and seventies but if we should believe Joan Vincent in her voluminous and informative book *Anthropology and Politics*, we now witness the “decline of political anthropology as a specialised subfield” (1990: 390). To the extent to which this is true I think that anthropologists nowadays tend to share their interests with professionals from other disciplines, such as historians, sociologists, political scientists, jurists, and do not have the need to stress their own uniqueness. One of the reasons certainly is that they no longer restrict themselves to the study of 'primitive' political systems but direct their attention to modern encapsulating political structures found in all societies.

The book gives a very detailed and profound picture of the relationship between the state and the chiefs in Togo and it would be difficult to speak of omissions. One wonders however why the author only incidentally (136) mentions the problem of ethnicity which must influence the position of the chiefs, especially as regards their role in the defence of tradition. What kinds of ethnic groups are there in Togo and how are they changing in themselves and in their mutual relationships?

I must end this review with a sad note. Von Trotha in his preface hails van Rouveroy as one of a small *avant garde* in the field of legal anthropology working in the favourable conditions of an old Dutch tradition. However, recent developments in the field make the prospects for the discipline in the Netherlands very dark. Keebet and Franz von Benda-Beckmann have moved to Germany and it is uncertain what is going to happen to their chairs. In Nijmegen the chair of anthropology of law has been discontinued.

Reference

VINCENT, Joan

1990 *Anthropology and Politics: Visions, Traditions, and Trends*. Tucson:
University of Arizona Press.