

Researching Power and Identity in African State Formation: Retrospect and Prospect

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ABSTRACT

Towards the end of the 19th century CE modern state structures were imposed upon the territories in sub-Saharan Africa which colonising European states had appropriated by a combination of military conquest and (usually treacherous) treaty negotiations. By the mid-1960s, most of these African countries had gained independence, usually on terms which perpetuated considerable post-colonial, political and economic influence of the former colonizing European power. Against the background of, usually, ill-understood and ill-accommodated pre-colonial African political structures and their afterlife, the saga had begun of one of the most significant processes in modern Africa: the vicissitudes of independent African states. This has included, among other aspects:

- the economic and political deficiency and instability;
- the tendency to internal strife along ethnic, regional, and religious lines;
- the waxing and waning of modern constitutional democracy as a dream or a reality;
- the failure of governance;
- the lure of military rule;
- the retreat or absence of the state as being eclipsed by both local and transcontinental military and economic entrepreneurs;
- the lure of individual transcontinental migration as an increasingly tragic non-solution
- and yet the persistent, courageous attempts, on the part African leaderships and civil society at large (the press, education, religious organisations, sports, women's organisations), and selected international agencies, to confront these shortcomings and to make the continent a fully-fledged part of today's globalising world).

All these manifestations are daily topics in today's new and old media coverage – and in your research.

With my distinguished colleague Professor Martin Doornbos (Institute of Social Studies, the Hague, the Netherlands) I have closely studied African states for the past half century (in my case, with emphasis on precolonial political forms, on incorporation, on ethnicity, and on religion); and we have recently compiled our central thoughts on these matters in a book published by the University of South Africa Press in 2017, same title as this seminar (cf.: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/doornbos & van binsbergen proofs.pdf>).

Selectively working down the four main sections of that book, and drawing inspiration mainly from the African countries where I have personally conducted research, my seminar's argument will highlight significant aspects of modern African states:

- Incorporation and political penetration
- Ethnicity and identity
- The ambiguous relationships between religion and state
- The construction of national politics.