

# BOOK REVIEW

**John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, editors. *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. viii + 361 pp. Figures. Index. \$105. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-226-51076-7.

A closer look at contemporary politics in Africa reveals that customary chieftaincies have assumed again—or perhaps continue to play—an important role in many countries. This trajectory from past to present has been a recurrent theme in African studies since the decolonization of the continent. Combining anthropology, political science, and history, its interdisciplinarity has made the study of chieftaincy an outstanding field for Africanists. The current resurgence of chieftaincies—or “chiefship,” as John and Jean Comaroff put it in *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*—lends new scholarly and societal relevance to this theme, as this edited volume shows.

In many parts of the continent, “traditional” or “customary” authority was engineered by colonial powers into more or less homogenous administrative chieftaincies that served as the lowest level of the colonial state. Such administrative chiefs played a pivotal role in all colonial empires. They carried different labels in British, French, Portuguese, and German colonies, but without such intermediary rulers and their support, no colonial administration would have survived for long. As intermediaries between the foreign, legal-bureaucratic administration and the local populace, they were often caught between two functions: On the one side, they were expected to be loyal to the colonial state and to enforce the authority of the European sovereigns. On the other, the local population often saw them as representatives of their own interests and as a channel to make their claims heard. Maintaining ties to both sides was an awkward task that often created profound and irresolvable dilemmas. With independence, it seemed likely that customary chieftaincy would disappear: Nation building meant limiting the power of “tribal” or customary chiefs or reducing it to purely ceremonial aspects. However, more than half a century after the independence of most African countries, many anthropologists and political scientists assert that “customary” chieftaincy has not come to an end. Its resurgence—which is perhaps more a renaissance than an uninterrupted continuity of one and the same institutionalized form—has become a major political factor in many African countries. “Chiefship and the customary are being remade,”

the editors state in the introduction, "... in a complex counterpoint, a dialectical synthesis, of partial truths ... in the interstices of the past and the present" (24).

The eleven contributions to the volume revolve around this thematic lens and nine questions that the editors ask in their introduction. These questions could be summarized as one: Where, how, in what disguises and under what conditions is chiefship asserting itself anew across Africa today (17)? Besides the introduction, which lays the basis for the following analyses, most contributions are case studies from different parts of the continent. The second chapter, written by Peter Geschiere, is an exception, adopting a broader, comparative perspective, interspersed with short hints at his research in and on Cameroon. He writes that the binary oppositions in which the role of chiefs have been repeatedly framed are misleading. Mahmood Mamdani's citizen versus subject and the two publics that the terms refer to is perhaps the most prominent one. Like the Comaroffs in their introductory contribution, Geschiere argues that today, chiefs build their repertoires of political practices on an undivided ensemble of historically iterated as well as other, contemporary ideas of political representation.

The other ten contributions adopt more local perspectives. Seven chapters look at chiefship in English-speaking countries. Sara Berry engages in a narrower comparison between chiefs in South Africa and Ghana. Mbongiseni Buthelezi and Dineao Skosana analyze the salience of chiefs in post-apartheid South Africa, Jocelyn Alexander looks at the politics of states and chiefs in Zimbabwe, while Mariane Ferme studies local-national politics in Sierra Leone. Susan Cook elaborates on themes that are particularly relevant for South Africa, namely, kingship, corporate ethnicity, and the economy. Lauren Adrover and Lauren Coyle both write on Ghana, addressing similar issues: the branding and the commodification of political authority and chiefs and sacrificial mining. The three remaining chapters focus on non-English-speaking countries. Benoît Beucher examines neo-traditionalism and aristocratic ethos in Burkina Faso, James Smith analyzes the articulation of kingship and mining in the goldfields of South Kivu, DRC, and Juan Obarrio writes on invisibility and the recognition of the customary in northern Mozambique.

In their analysis, the editors attribute the resurgence of chiefship to a reconfiguration of political and market forces in which new forms of authority have emerged. This produces a social space where the actors stage their political identities, among them chiefs who draw on both old and new repertoires of political practice. Taking the argument of the editors a step further, one could argue that "tradition" and "custom" are first and foremost discursive resources in political struggles. They can be used in various ways, thus creating new and renewed articulations between the state and its imagined other, the "custom" and its alleged "authenticity." Chiefs as political actors may and often do make use of one or the other repertoire—customary as well as contemporary—according to the necessities of the

situation they are facing. The very same actors could be classified as “customary chiefs” and then again as “entrepreneurs, political leaders, unionists, etc.” Indeed, they frequently play with the two repertoires to reinforce their political claims whenever one or the other offers better prospects.

Such a situational perspective runs through almost all contributions, but it is rarely theorized. What the book does not explore as well is the discursive power of acephalous social orders to distance oneself from the state. The contributions focus more or less exclusively on customary chiefs, as the subtitle states, though the relevance of non-centralized customary legitimacy for political articulations is mentioned and recognized in the introduction. However, as a collection of papers on chiefship and the politics of custom, the volume works more than well. It is a compelling collection of insights in what chiefs and chiefship have become in the twenty-first century.

Till Förster

University of Basel

Basel, Switzerland

till.foerster@unibas.ch

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### **For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Albrecht, Peter. 2017. “The Hybrid Authority of Sierra Leone’s Chiefs.” *African Studies Review* 60 (3): 159–80. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.87.
- Berry, Sara. 2017. “Struggles over Land and Authority in Africa.” *African Studies Review* 60 (3): 105–25. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.96.
- Guyer, Jane I. 1996. “Traditions of Invention in Equatorial Africa.” *African Studies Review* 39 (3): 1–28. doi:10.2307/524941.