(PRE-)COLONIAL LEGACIES
PATRIMONIAL LOGIC OF CENTRIFUGAL FORCES IN THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE UPPER GUINEA COAST

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Abstract

This essay develops a patrimonial model of shifting political relations between central and subordinate authority-levels in the history of territorial settlements on the Upper Guinea Coast. The model—drawn from Weberian political sociology—identifies centrifugal tensions in those relations, and provides a heuristic for analyzing regional causal factors shaping political change. The argument highlights the paradox of patrimonial systems, namely the political and ideological mechanisms used to create social integration—political and economic reciprocity between patrons and clients, the charisma of patrimonial rulers, clientalist personal loyalty and support, patriarchical ethos, gerontocracy, etc.—are the same mechanisms structuring conflict and instability when a changing political economy provides new resources and opportunities, or constraints. The Weberian patrimonial model provides an important key to solving that paradox.

Introduction

A constant motif in the political history of the Upper Guinea Coast is the story of subordinate levels of authority weakening or usurping the power of the central authority, and, alternatively, central authority resisting limitations on its power. Strategies of subordinate actors and groups—e.g., latecomers to territorial settlements, powerful clients, slaves with jurisdiction over slave villages, subchiefs, ritual leaders, warriors, etc.—comprise a regional drama of using systemic social and economic resources to increase power vis-à-vis the original central authority. Understanding structure and strategy in this political process is a central puzzle of Upper Guinea Coast culture and history. And an important key to the puzzle is the Weberian (1978, chap. 12) patrimonial model because it schematizes political change as a problem of the structural tension and strategies between levels of authority within territories—relations built on patron-client interdependency, support, and loyalty. Central questions concern various regional, systemic political or economic effects on changes in the balance of