The notion of ‘good governance’, as used in Africa in recent years, has its origins in the desperation of donors to find a formula for producing development, or at least, economic growth. Problems with governance were singled out as the reason why the structural adjustment measures of the 1980s and early 90s did not lead to the hoped-for growth, and ‘good governance’ was expected to correct this. As far as the role of rural society was concerned, recommendations for ‘good governance’, like those for ‘structural adjustment’ before them, rested on a view of rural society as largely passive and responsive to initiatives by the centre. In the ‘good governance’ discourse, the origins of rural state institutions in the authoritarian colonial state readily underpin the notion of rural peoples’ helplessness. The co-optation of pre-colonial rural power brokers by colonial rulers is central to this narrative. In this analysis, rural power brokers need local roots to be effective, but the state established itself from its inception as the new source of their powers. Securing and maintaining connections with the state is the first task of any intermediary. Given this dependence, the obvious explanations for the practical failures of these state institutions in the terms of ‘good governance’ are incompetence or corruption. Campaigns for ‘good governance’ are what serves to remove them.

This overall view clashes with many detailed studies of rural local politics in Africa, which show a wide variety of processes, with at least some scope for local actors to shape outcomes. Nevertheless, social scientists too have struggled to conceptualise the influence of both pre-colonial and colonial heritages in present day politics, where it appears ever palpable, but near impossible to pin down. Two productive
approaches to the phenomenon are those put forward by Mahmood Mamdani and Jean Francois Bayart. The former identified the roots of post-colonial authoritarianism in the creation of rural ‘subjects’ by the colonial state, describing Indirect Rule chiefs as tapping ‘authoritarian possibilities in culture’ to be come ‘decentralised despots’. The latter similarly describes local African rulers turning the orders of colonial administrators to their own advantages. He described this colonial process as a stage in the centuries-old history of ‘extraversion’, whereby political leaders in Africa exploit their linkages with the outside world and marginalise others from them.

The present study offers a variation on these themes, in a bid to show that the discourse of ‘good governance’ is not merely formulaic, but itself political. It argues that in Southeast Tanzania, local political actors continue to reason not only in terms of political processes and arenas centred on the state, but also in terms of local political processes which escape definition by the centre. While the imposition and formation of the state changed political practice, state institutions did not come to define it exclusively. From the villagers’ point of view, the end result of the changes aimed at by colonial administrators or modern-day technocrats, i.e. the functioning ‘modern’ state was—and is—not obvious. They have lived and still live through an open-ended process where the relative strength of institutions based on the central state and of those based on local sources of power is negotiable. Ambitious villagers can think of the institutions of the state as a player among others within the local arena, even if it is the dominant one. Controlling their interaction with state institutions has nevertheless been a constant problem for local power brokers, and arguably, the discourse of ‘good governance’ has itself become an ambiguous factor in their efforts.

The present study, then, supports Bayart’s view, important from the point of view of campaigners for village democratisation and good governance, that misuse of office among members of local government is not so much an effect of ignorance, to be done away with by ‘capacity building’, or of the hijacking of state-conferred power for narrow self-interest, as it is part of a deeply rooted, if adaptable, practice of politics. Attention to the internationally connected regime of transmission and

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