THE NEO-TRIBAL COMPETITIVE ORDER
IN THE BORDERLAND OF EGYPT AND LIBYA

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Introduction

Colonial expansion and the subsequent global implementation of statehood seemed to support the idea of evolutionists and scholars of the theory of systems that the modern bureaucratic state of western origin is the inevitable model of political organisation for human societies. Since the end of the Cold War, the crisis and the factual erosion of the state in the former USSR and Africa initiated a debate on the transformation of statehood. Apart from generalisations such as “weak” or “failing” states, transformations of statehood are nowadays labelled with numerous additional attributes, such as “network state” (Züricher and Koehler 2001), a term referring to interconnections between the state and networks of non-state actors, or “cunning states” (Randeria 2003), describing weak states that rely on development cooperation and international aid to survive.

In the last two decades, Africa has experienced dramatic changes resulting in new social and political settings almost everywhere on the continent. The end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, multiparty democracy in Tanzania and Benin, the achievement of peace in Mozambique and Angola, civil wars in Somalia, Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the Rwanda genocide and the regionalisation of conflicts are a few well-known, examples of a political setting that is becoming more and more heterogeneous. These processes have not only chased many of Africa’s military or dictatorial regimes away, but have also fragmented organised state structures and administration or have even caused them to collapse. These changes are sometimes explained as part of global change: a result of the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Socialist Block. At other times, specific African causes are put forward. Africa, however, nowadays serves as a particularly powerful symbol of state failure. In Africa, the crisis of statehood seems to be deeper than else where in the world. Significantly, the attributes used to qualify resulting structures of the African
state have been consistently negative: “failing”, “failed”, “weak”, “soft”, “incomplete”, “collapsed”, “greedy”, or “criminal”, are some of them (Bayart 1989; Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999; Fatton 1992; Chabal and Daloz 1999). The term ‘heterarchy’, as opposed to hierarchy, seems appropriate to describe resulting differentiated distributions of power-foci in many African countries (Chabal, Feinman and Skalnik 2004; Bodarenko, Grinin and Korotayev 2004).

During the same period regional or transnational political actors emerged (Copans 2003) who attempted to, and sometimes even succeeded in, expropriating state sovereignty and administration through processes of informal ‘privatisation’ (Klute / Trotha 2004). Some of the new actors on the complex African political scene seem to be well known “old fellows”: chieftaincies and so-called traditional authorities are now reappearing on the regional and national political stage (Oomen 2002; Van Rouveroy 1994). Some political actors, however, wear new faces. These new actors include ethnic militia, economic and military entrepreneurs, transnational smugglers, and last but not least, agents in international organisations of development aid or conflict management.

Nevertheless, the central reference of thought and consideration remains the state. Political organisation beside or beyond the state is predominantly perceived as deviant development, and not as independent political organisation. This is particularly true for the discussion on the reconstruction of statehood in Africa (Tetzlaff / Jacobeit 2005). As a consequence, current debates on non-state groups and formations focus on the “informalisation” or the “re-traditionalisation” of politics in Africa (Chabal / Dalosz 1999; Kassimir 2001), portraying non-state actors as competitors and opponents of the state.

Looking at the way political anthropology is dealing with the transformation of statehood in Africa, one can distinguish three lines of thought. The first perspective is dedicated to local case studies: Bierschenk (1999) analyses the political arena and its actors in the African city of Parakou in Benin and thus illustrates how the command state (Elwert 2001) operates behind the facade of modern statehood on the basis of clientelism, corruption, and the appropriation of development aid. The second school focuses on African chieftainship and segmentary models of tribal organisation; it tries to integrate a historical perspective that aims at the analysis of continuities and innovations of these modes of political organisation within new contexts and settings (Spear 2003). This school was able to demonstrate how chieftainship