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Use of the Term ‘Empire’ in Historical Research on Africa: A Comparative Approach

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of the term ‘empire’ in historical research on Africa to illustrate the problem of ‘comparability’ and the requirement for measurement and appropriateness of the ‘measurement language’. Taking the reader through a review of the literature, beginning with Maurice Delafosse's popularisation of the concept in his essays on ancient Ghana, Mali and Songhai in 1912 and climaxing with pointers in the multi-volume UNESCO *General History of Africa* in the late twentieth century, the author exposes the essential inconsistency in African and Africanist use of the term, ‘empire’, which inevitably crept into the study of African history in the heydays of ‘conceptual Eurocentrism’. He maintains that the usage of the term ‘empire’ in African historiography was employed due to the need to name those African states which were extensive territorially and multi-ethnically; and states designated ‘empires’ were characterised by certain elements of an imperial organisation rather than by a fully formed imperial system. And for analogues and comparisons, the form of dependence between the centre and the subordinated tribes and early states that developed in Africa reminds us rather of the relations existing on the other continents in the early stages of large state formation. Hence, the term ‘early empire’ seems more justified to describe these states in research on the history of Africa. The author calls for the need to conduct discussion, with the help of a comparative method, on the specific features of those ‘early empires’.

Résumé

Cet article étudie l'utilisation du terme «empire» dans la recherche historique sur l'Afrique, afin d'illustrer le problème de la «comparabilité» ainsi que le besoin d'un système de mesure et d'opportunité du «langage de mesure». En transportant le lecteur dans une revue de littérature, qui commence par la popularisation de ce concept par Maurice Delafosse, dans ses essais sur les anciens empires du Ghana, du Mali et l'empire Songhaï, et aboutit à des indica-

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tions figurant dans l'ouvrage multi-volume de l'Unesco intitulé *Histoire générale de l'Afrique* vers la fin du 20^e siècle, l'auteur présente la principale incohérence contenue dans l'usage du terme «empire» par les Africains et les africanistes, qui s'est inévitablement faufilée dans l'étude de l'histoire africaine, durant l'apogée de l'«eurocentrisme conceptuel». Il affirme que l'usage du terme «empire» dans l'historiographie africaine s'explique par le besoin de trouver une qualification à ces États africains qui présentait une certaine envergure sur le plan territorial et multiethnique. Ainsi, les États qualifiés d'«empires» étaient caractérisés par quelques éléments relevant de l'organisation impériale, plutôt que par un système impérial complet. En termes d'analogie et de comparaison, le type de dépendance qui existait entre le centre, les tribus sous domination et les premiers États qui se sont développés en Afrique rappelle davantage les relations existant au niveau des autres continents au tout début du processus de formation des grands États. Ainsi, le terme de «pré-empire» semble plus adapté pour décrire ces États en questions, dans le cadre de la recherche sur l'histoire de l'Afrique. L'auteur estime qu'il est nécessaire d'engager une discussion, à travers la méthode comparative, sur les caractéristiques spécifiques de ces «pré-empires».

African pre-colonial states differed with respect to their territorial sizes, economies and ethnic compositions of the population. Some of the states occupied a small territory, clearly delimited geographically and economically and inhabited by a single ethnic group or population, among which one sub-group unquestionably dominated the others. By way of example, we can list here: the Yoruba city-states, Benin, the city-states of Hausa, the Wolof state, Dahomey, Congo, Buganda, and Rwanda. Other African states had extensive territories, differentiated from the viewpoint of geographical environment, economy and ethnic composition of the population. Large, multi-ethnic African states are often termed 'empires' in the literature on the subject.

Examples of the use of the term 'empire' are very numerous. We cannot quote them all, so we will only list the best known ones here. Many of them occur in works devoted to the history of West Africa, and especially the area of Western Sudan. The term 'empire' was introduced quite early on in investigations into the history of that part of Africa. In 1912, Maurice Delafosse not only defined as 'empires' Ghana, Mali and Songhay, he also wrote about: *empires mossi et gourmantche; l'empire Sosso ou du Kaniaga; les empires banmana de Segou et du Kaarta; l'empire toucouleur d'El-Hadj Omar; l'empire de Samori; l'empire de Tekroun* (pp.427-28). What surprises in this list is not only the label of 'empire' for a state formation as ephemeral as Sosso, or to the tribal organisation such as the Gurmantsche people; but also using the term 'kingdom' rather than 'empire' with respect to such a territorially extensive and ethnically diverse Fulbe state of Macina. We will

find no explanation of this differentiation in Delafosse's work. However, the terminology he used had a strong influence on later research.

The use of the term 'empire' is accepted most often with respect to Ghana (in its heyday from about the seventh century to the eleventh century), Mali (heyday in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) and Songhay (heyday in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries).¹ Also the political organisations of the Bambara of Segu, the Tukulor, as well as the Fulbe from Macina were termed 'empires'.² Another state recognised as an 'empire' was Oyo, lying to the south of the Western Sudanese states, in the area adjacent to the tropical forests on the Guinea coast (Akinjogbin 1966; Law 1977). Among the states lying to the south of the Sahara, in Central Sudan, the term 'empire' is used with respect to Borno. Also Ethiopia is commonly so termed.³ Another area where numerous political organisations termed 'empires' in the literature functioned in the past is the Congo basin and the savannahs of the South. Here a fact worthy of consideration is that of Congo, termed kingdom, even with respect to its heyday in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, while the Luba and Lunda states, centralised to a lesser degree, are termed 'empires' (Margarido 1970; Wilson 1972), as well as the state of Monomotapa situated in East Africa (Randles 1975).

The term empire, used in the above-mentioned monographic works devoted to the individual states of pre-colonial Africa, has been adopted—though inconsistently—by the authors and editors of the syntheses of African history published under UNESCO patronage. This adoption was based to a large extent on historiographic tradition. There is no separate chapter devoted to the adopted terminology. The practical solutions employed in the individual volumes are different.

Volume III, of the UNESCO General History of Africa edited by M. Elfasi and I. Hrbek—*Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*—uses the term kingdom to refer to Ghana.⁴ In Volume IV, edited by D.T. Niane—*Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*—the authors writing about Mali and Songhay use the term empire, but this is not the case for Borno, for which the term kingdom is used. With respect to Ethiopia, both the terms: kingdom and 'empire' are indiscriminately used.⁵ In Volume V, edited by B.A. Ogot—*Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*—the authors abandon the term 'empire' in favour of the term kingdom or a more general one of a political system, or in favour of African terms, such as *mansaya*, *bulopwe*, *Mmwant Yav*, etc. In that volume, the term 'empire' is used, however, with respect to Lunda and Ethiopia.⁶ Finally, Volume VI, edited by J.F. Ade Ajayi—*Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*—sees the return to the term 'empire' used with respect to the Lunda, Oyo and the Tukulor states.

The Mossi states are termed both kingdoms and 'empires'. With respect to the Fulbe of Macina, the African term *dina* is used. The section concerning Ethiopia discusses decentralisation and 'decline of imperial authority'.⁷

Such use of the term 'empire' needs to be considered from two points of view. Firstly, we propose to compare features of the individual African pre-colonial states called 'empires' in order to compose a collection of typical and frequently occurring features of African 'empires'. Secondly, we need to compare the features of non-African 'empires' with the African ones.

Despite the inconsistencies referred to above, in historical research on Africa the term 'empire' is applied as a rule to political organisations (states) which had the following features:

- (i) Large area;
- (ii) Centralised powers;
- (iii) Successfully conducted territorial expansion;
- (iv) Subordination of many peoples with different cultures, occupations and internal organisation systems to the superior organisation.

The issue of occurrence of these features in pre-colonial African 'empires' requires further analysis. Their territories were not uniform—they usually consisted of a central area and peripheries. The former was governed by the ruler and the latter by provincial chiefs he had appointed. But as conquests progressed and new territories were included in the empire, the number of provinces did increase. Remote areas were administered indirectly, and their relatively loose dependency was expressed in paying an annual tax and supplying people for the victorious ruler's army.⁸

In the peripheral areas included in the 'empire', the local tribal or early state organisation was maintained; the former chiefs or rulers or—in case of their resistance, defeat or death—other members of the local dynasty were left in power there. They were only assigned the duties of provision of people for military expeditions, collection and delivery of taxes, often involving the obligation to report personally, once a year, at the victorious ruler's court in order to deliver the tax and renew the bonds of political allegiance.

Leaving the old political organisations on the peripheries of the 'empire' more or less to themselves was the cheapest way of subordinating them and including them in the political system of the victorious empire, since this solution did not require organisation of the empire's own administration. In face of the weakness of the economy and the low level of surplus means, use of such a system was often the only way of increasing the area of the 'empire'. But the system had its faults too. Local, dependent chiefs tended to throw off foreign power at any opportunity, refuse to send the tax and people, and

neglect the duty to report at the court. What is more, exploitation of the subordinated peripheral organisations and the struggle to maintain their internal structure resulted in blocking their development.

Thus, without negating the feature of possessing extensive territories exhibited by the ‘empires’ in which we are interested, in their spatial organisation we observe partial centralisation of power. The peripheral organisations subordinated to the centre included not only early state organisations, but also tribal ones. What is more, the development of tribes towards early state organisation was blocked or fraught with difficulties. For this reason, some of the researchers either negate or consider as disputable the use of the term ‘empire’ with respect to the state organisations they study.⁹

According to the tradition of research concerning general history (Eisenstadt 1963, 1968; Doyle 1986; Mann 1986), an ‘empire’ is a state of states, a superior organisation built over dependent states. This gives rise to the question of constructing a superior power over tribal organisations. K. Polanyi used the term early empire, which was adopted in later research. But recent publications devoted to ‘early empires’ on different continents do not resolve the dilemma regarding the role of tribes in their structure (Polanyi 1957; Tapar 2001).

The second, important feature of an ‘empire’ is its endeavours in the military, political and ideological spheres to arrange the whole surrounding world known to the ruling group according to its own religious, legal and political rules and principles developed in the centre of imperial power (Conrad 1984; Khazaniv 1993; Doyle 1986).

As a result of the inclusion of peripheral tribes and early states in their own territory, the areas of many African ‘empires’ were settled by very diverse ethnic groups, differing in their occupations and cultures. This diversity within a single political organism facilitated mutual infiltration of cultures. The rulers and ruling groups in the centre were aware that cultural differences weakened cohesion of the empire. They tried to counteract it on the ideological plane. Where Islam was adopted, it became the religion of the ruling group both in the centre and on the peripheries (Trimingham 1962, 1968; Monteil 1972; Levtzion 1988). A similar role was played by Christianity in the case of Ethiopia, and in the intention of the rulers of Congo at the end of the fifteenth and in the sixteenth centuries in the Congo kingdom (Thornton 1983). And where the use of Islam or Christianity was impossible, this function was fulfilled by the cult of the ruler and the recognition of the supremacy of his magic power over the power of the subordinated rulers and chiefs. An example of this is the worship of Sango in old Oyo.

A comparison of the methods and circumstances of building a religious or ideological supremacy in the 'empires' known from the general history with the methods and circumstances occurring in African 'empires' allows us to establish a considerable difference between them. In cases referring to Islam, the centre of an African 'empire' was not the main centre of the religion the state subscribed to. This was located in Mecca, Medina, Cairo, and hence outside the reach of the local empire's power. What is more, in Africa there was both awareness that the religious centre was situated outside and a good knowledge of the holy places of Islam. In this situation, an African 'empire' could not aspire to a full religious supremacy and to ordering the world solely according to its principles.

Neither could such a supremacy be provided by Christianity, for its centres, both Catholic and Protestant ones, were situated outside Africa. However, in the case of Ethiopia, where a separate Ethiopian church existed, we can assume that the religious and cultural foundations for building imperial power developed there (Tamrat 1972; Kaplan 1988).

The above overview of the usage of the term 'empire' in African historiography leads to the following conclusions:

- (i) The term 'empire' was employed due to the need to name those African countries which were extensive territorially and multi-ethnically.
- (ii) The use of this term in historiography is not consistent.
- (iii) Some of the researchers reject the use of this term.
- (iv) African states referred to as 'empires' were characterised by certain elements of an imperial organisation rather than by a fully formed imperial system.
- (v) In African 'empires' religions fulfilled the role of a factor unifying the ruling group. However, those 'empires', except for Ethiopia, were not the main centres of great religious systems, and neither were they able to arrange the world they knew according to the principles of those religions.
- (vi) If we were to look for analogues and comparisons, then the form of dependence between the centre and the subordinated tribes and early states that developed in Africa reminds us rather of the relations existing on the other continents in the early stages of large state formation.
- (vii) It seems justified to adopt the term 'early empire' in research on the history of Africa.
- (viii) It is necessary to conduct—with the help of the comparative method—discussion on the specific features of those 'early empires'.

Notes

1. G. Dieterlen, Diarra Sylla, *L'empire de Ghana. Le Wagadou et les traditions de Yérére*, Paris 1922; C. Monteil, "Les 'empires' du Mali", *Bulletin CHSAOF*, 1929; Madina Ly Tall, *Contribution à l'histoire de l'empire du Mali (XIIIe—XVIe siècles)*, 1977; J. Béraud-Villars, *L'empire de Gao, un état soudanais au XVe et au XVIe siècles*, 1942; J. Boulnois, Boubou Hama, *L'empire de Gao. Histoire, coutumes et magie des Songhai*, 1954; S.M. Cissoko, *Tombouctou et l'empire Songhay*, 1975.
2. L. Kesteloot (ed.), "Le mythe et l'histoire dans la formation de l'empire de Segou", *Bulletin IFAN*, 1978; A.H. Ba, J. Daget, *L'empire Peul du Macina*, vol. I (1818-1853), 1962; Y.J. Saint-Martin, *L'empire Toucouleur 1848-1897*, Paris 1970; O. Oloruntimehin, *The Segu Tuculor Empire*, 1972.
3. Y. Urvoy, *Histoire de l'Empire de Bornou*, 1949; S. Pankhurst, *Ethiopia. A Cultural History*, London 1955; J.M. Kobišcanov, *Obšcestviennyye otnošenía v Aksumskom carstve, Afrikanskii Etnograficeskii Sbornik*, V., 1963; A.H. Jones, E. Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia*, 1965; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, 1972; A. Bartnicki, J. Mantel-Niecko, *Geschichte Athiopiens von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, t.1-2, 1978.
4. General History of Africa, vol. III, *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, M. El Fasi, I. Hrbek, eds, UNESCO 1988, p. 308ss.
5. General History of Africa, vol. IV, *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, D.T. Niane (ed.), UNESCO 1984, p. 126ss, 152ss, 172s (Mali), 191ss
6. General History of Africa, vol. V, *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, B.A. Ogot, ed., UNESCO 1992, p. 43 (mansaya), 590, 595 (bulopwe), 590ss (political systems), 593 (Mwant Yav), 6012-603 (Lunda as 'empire' and imperial organisation), 705-709 (Christian Ethiopian Empire).
7. General History of Africa, vol. VI, *Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*, J.F. Ade Ajayi (ed.), UNESCO 1989, p. 17 ('Empires' of Lunda, Old Oyo, Mossi), 377 (decline of imperial authority in Ethiopia), 600,611ss (Tukulor empire), 605 (dina), 672-678 (Mossi kingdoms).
8. L. Mair, *African Kingdoms*, 1977, pp. 74-78: *The Core and the Periphery*; J. Vansina, 'A Comparison of African Kingdoms', *Africa* 1962; R. Thapar, 'The State as Empire', in *The Study of the State*, J.H.M. Claessen, P. Skalnik (eds.), 1981, pp. 409-426, wrote "In the typology of early 'empires' the nature of the relationship between metropolitan and the peripheral areas is crucial" (p. 411); M. Tymowski, *Le territoire et les frontières du Songhay à la fin du XVe et au XVIe siècle—le problème du centre et de territoires périphériques d'un grand Etat de l'Afrique occidentale*, UNESCO, forthcoming.
9. E.I. Steinhard, "From 'Empire' to State: the Emergence of the Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara c. 1350–1890", in *The Study*, op cit., pp. 353-370: ('of the transformation of Kitara from an extensive and loose-knit 'Empire' to a smaller and more compact 'state'), p. 354; J. P. Chrétien, "L'empire de Bacwezi; la construction d'un imaginaire géopolitique", *Annales ESC*, 1985, pp. 1335-1377: 'empire' ou constellation clanique?" (p. 1341).

10. S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of 'empires'*, New York 1963; S.N. Eisenstadt, 'Empire', in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, D. L. Sills, ed., 1968, vol. 5, pp. 41- 49; M.W. Doyle, 'Empires', 1986; M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, 1: A History of Power to A.D. 1760*, 1986.

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