Decentring the State

What African Experiences with Plural Authority Mean for Party Theory

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Research on political parties has become a global enterprise. A field that for a long time concentrated heavily on Europe and North America now includes productive research agendas with a focus on Africa, Asia and Latin America. As a result of this geographical expansion, new experiences have been brought to bear on established concepts, theories and findings, leading to a better understanding of their actual scope. Even more fundamentally, the global expansion of party research has led to innovations in comparative theorising about parties. New concepts have emerged, old ones have been challenged and refined, and more inclusive comparative frameworks have emerged. Among the topics transformed by this globalisation of party research is the study of clientelism and patronage, ethnic mobilisation, dominant party systems, electoral authoritarianism and party system institutionalisation.[1]

However, this movement towards more genuinely comparative theorising has been uneven. One area where it remains incomplete is in the treatment of political authority, and specifically, how the condition of plural authority shapes parties – what they do, where they come from, and how they should be regulated. This is a serious gap because, in much of the world, parties operate alongside traditional, customary, religious and other institutions that exercise politically consequential authority. These institutions were "discovered" by scholars from various disciplines a long time ago.[2] Yet, what the presence and operation of these traditional authorities means for general theories of party politics remains unclear.

This blog draws on African experiences to consider what plural authority means for party theorising. Its central argument is that taking plural authority seriously raises new questions about parties and challenges some of the assumptions embedded in established theories. African experiences therefore do more than reveal the limits of existing party theory; they provide critical resources for reconstructing it as a more genuinely global comparative theory.

A Hidden Assumption of Party Theory

The problem can also be understood from the standpoint of party theory itself. From here, it appears as a background assumption that is often taken for granted, but which in fact reflects a more particular historical and geographical condition than is commonly recognised. That assumption is the idea that parties operate within a unified framework of political authority centred on the state. For example, in his canonical text, Giovanni Sartori described parties as "the central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government."[3] This insight captures a familiar model of representation and governance that runs from society, through parties, to the state. But it warrants closer examination on the grounds that it may oversimplify the reality of representation and governance if parties do not operate in a unified authority framework centred on the state. That

[1] E.g. Matthias Basedau and Alexander Stroh, *Measuring Party Institutionalization in Developing Countries: A New Research Instrument Applied to 28 African Political Parties*, GIGA Working Paper No. 69, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2008; Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511585869.

[2] Kate Baldwin, *The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781316422335; Carolyn Logan, *The Roots of Resilience: Exploring Popular Support for African Traditional Authorities*, African Affairs, 112 (2013), DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adt025; Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton University Press, 1996), DOI: 10.2307/j.ctvc77c7w.

assumption is widely shared even though the party scholarship has been attuned to institutional complexity, as shown by the significant attention it gives to territorial arrangements such as federalism, decentralisation, regional autonomy and multilevel governance. [4] But, crucially, these arrangements distribute authority among different territorial levels within what is still an encompassing state-centred order. The deeper question, then, is whether the state provides the only source of authoritative ordering in the first place.

The concept of legal pluralism helps to clarify the alternative. It draws attention to settings in which state law operates alongside customary, religious, indigenous and other normative orders.[5] The orders may overlap, compete or become incorporated into one another, and individuals can be situated within multiple orders simultaneously. Legal and political authority are not the same thing, but these non-state legal orders are sustained by institutions that organise communities, perform governance functions (e.g. adjudicating disputes), command allegiance, and draw on their own sources of legitimacy – in short, they exercise independent political authority. This possibility of multiple political authorities complicates the familiar image of party politics. Parties are often understood as organisations that aggregate interests within society and compete with one another for control of the state. But what if the society in which parties operate is already politically organised through institutions that the party neither creates nor controls? And what if acquiring control of the state does not give parties control over all the sources of authority that matter for governance?

Two Cases of Plural Authority

Plural authority structures, grounded in traditional and religious institutions, are common in Africa. Consider the case of Ghana. It provides a particularly clear case of institutionalised traditional authority. This is reflected in its Constitution which guarantees the institution of chieftaincy and traditional councils, while also establishing National and Regional Houses of Chiefs and assigning them functions relating to customary law and chieftaincy.[6] Nigeria illustrates a different form of pluralism. Its constitution doesn't go so far as to institutionalise traditional roles, like the Ghanaian constitution, but it accommodates multiple legal systems based on Sharia law and customary law.[7] Thus, both countries depart from a straightforwardly monist order, in which the state exists as the sole political authority, but in different ways.

Interestingly, both constitutions also recognise and place nation-building obligations on political parties. Article 55 of Ghana's Constitution requires parties to have a "national character" and prohibits membership based on ethnic, religious, regional or other sectional divisions. Similarly, Nigeria's Constitution prohibits ethnically or territorially restricted parties.[8] It also requires the composition of a party's governing body to reflect the country's "federal character," including representation from at least two-thirds of the states in its executive committee.[9] In both cases, then, constitutional recognition of multiple sources of authority coexists with constitutional recognition of political parties and, more specifically, rules designed to make parties cross territorial and communal divisions. It seems reasonable to say that these constitutions express a certain division of labour in which traditional authorities undertake local gover-

[3] Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (ECPR Press, 2005 [1976]), p. ix.

[4] E.g. Pradeep Chhibber and Ken Kollman, *The Formation of National Party Systems: Federalism and Party Competition in Canada, Great Britain, India, and the United States* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Kris Deschouwer, *Political Parties as Multi-Level Organizations*, in: Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (eds.), *Handbook of Party Politics* (Sage, 2006), DOI: 10.4135/9781848608047.n25.

[5] John Griffiths, *What Is Legal Pluralism?*, The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law, 18 (1986), DOI: 10.1080/07329113.1986.10756387; Sally Engle Merry, *Legal Pluralism*, Law & Society Review, 22 (1988), DOI: 10.2307/3053638.

[6] Constitution of Ghana, Articles 270-275.

[7] Constitution of Nigeria, Sections 275 and 280.

[8] Constitution of Nigeria, Section 222.

[9] Constitution of Nigeria, Section 223.

nance functions, while parties provide a means of national political integration. The standard society-party-state model does not seem to capture the more complex modes of governance imagined by these constitutions or seen in practice in these societies.

Rethinking Parties under Plural Authority

Ghana and Nigeria suggest why plural authority matters for thinking about the role of parties. But what changes more generally if we rethink parties from this alternative standpoint? The implications are potentially significant. Consider, first, party origins. Influential accounts explain how social cleavages become mobilised through parties,[10] and how politicians organise to pursue electoral and policy objectives.[11] Under plural authority, however, party formation is not simply a matter of organising society for competition over the state. Parties may emerge in political landscapes already organised through other institutions possessing leaders, constituencies and legitimacy of their own. Botswana illustrates the point: modern party politics developed amid established Tswana polities whose chiefs already occupied positions of political authority.[12]

Party organisation looks somewhat different from this perspective too. Classic models of cadre, mass, catch-all and cartel parties describe very different relationships among party elites, members, social constituencies and the state.[13] Yet under plural authority, citizens may also be organised through, and subject to the power of, non-party and non-state institutions. In northern Nigeria, for example, party development was shaped by established emirate institutions. As CS Whitaker shows, traditional structures influenced party organisational strategies especially within the developing Northern People's Congress.[14] In settings such as these, an account of party organisation must extend beyond the party itself to encompass the networks connecting party actors with other centres of authority.

Party competition may also need to be understood more expansively. Sartori famously conceptualised party systems through interparty interactions. That relational insight remains powerful, but under conditions of plural authority the relevant relationships may extend beyond parties to include traditional authorities, who cannot simply be treated as analogous to party factions or interest groups because they can possess independent sources of authority and legitimacy within their communities. Parties must therefore take these authority holders into account as they compete to win control of the state. In Ghana, for example, parties court traditional leaders, seeking their support during election campaigns.[15] Party competition should be understood in such contexts not simply in terms of interparty interactions, but also in terms of parties' relationships with other authority holders.

Finally, plural authority raises questions about party regulation. Party law is normally concerned with matters such as registration, political finance, internal democracy, and associational freedom. These remain important concerns. But regulation in a plural political order also structures relationships between parties and other authority holders. For example, a constitution, like that of Uganda, may recognise traditional or cultural leaders while prohibiting them from participating in partisan politics. Rules such as these raise important questions about the boundary between traditional and party-political authority. The new, revealed questions include whether regulation should aim to separate or connect political orders, and whether familiar regulatory approaches facilitate or

[10] Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignment: An Introduction*, in: Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (Free Press, 1967).

[11] John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[12] Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A. Robinson, *An African Success Story: Botswana*, in: Dani Rodrik (ed.), *In Search of Prosperity: Analytic Narratives on Economic Growth* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

[13] Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (Meuthen, 1964); Otto Kirchheimer, *The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems*, in: Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton University Press, 1966), DOI: 10.1515/9781400875337-007; Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, *Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party*, Party Politics, 1 (1995), DOI: 10.1177/1354068895001001.

impede parties' capacity to represent within plural orders and indeed mediate across them.

Recognising plural authority does not require endorsing or romanticising it. Traditional institutions can reproduce hierarchy, exclusion and unaccountable power, sometimes worsened by the legacies of colonial intervention.[16] But evidence of such pathologies does not by itself establish state-centred monism as the only or most appropriate democratic endpoint. The better normative inquiry is to ask what parties ought to do under conditions of plural authority, and especially, when should they accommodate, challenge or seek to reform other authority holders, and under what conditions might parties promote political integration without institutional assimilation?

Party Theory and Reflexive Globalisation

Existing party theories are not mistaken simply because they assume a unified, state-centric framework of political authority. In many contexts, that assumption may be entirely appropriate. The problem arises when such theories are treated as having a broader scope than their underlying assumptions warrant. One response is to specify their scope more carefully. Another response – as I've argued here – is to rethink concepts and theories informed by experiences that initially appear exceptional. This latter move has affinities with Dipesh Chakrabarty's project of "provincialising" apparently universal ideas originating from European intellectual traditions.[17] The point is not to reject concepts because of where they originated, but to reimagine them in light of encounters with new experiences. As Chakrabarty puts it, "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations."[18]

The idea of reflexive globalisation, developed by Philipp Dann and Florian Jeßberger, pushes this argument in a complementary direction.[19] They contrast an earlier understanding of globalisation as a unidirectional "Westernisation" with a new, "fundamentally multidirectional" dialogue between South and North, metropole and periphery. The implication is that globalisation should involve more than a one-way journey for concepts; feedback from diverse global experiences should contribute to conceptual refinement and reconstruction. Party scholarship has already undergone this kind of reflexive exchange in other areas. Plural authority provides another opportunity. African experiences make visible a political condition that is neither uniquely African nor historically unusual: parties can operate amid several politically consequential sources of authority. Taking that possibility seriously changes the questions we ask about party origins, organisation, competition and regulation. The broader lesson is that genuinely comparative theory cannot be produced simply by applying concepts developed in one setting to an ever-wider range of cases. Globalising theory also means allowing different political experiences to rebound back upon and change those concepts.

[14] C. Sylvester Whitaker, *The Politics of Tradition: Continuity and Change in Northern Nigeria, 1946–1966* (Princeton University Press, 1970), Ch. 8.
[15] George M. Bob-Milliar and Jeffrey W. Paller, *The Social Embeddedness of Elections: Ghana's 2016 and 2020 Campaigns*, Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 61 (2023), DOI: 10.1080/14662043.2023.2242107.
[16] Liya Palagashvili, *African Chiefs: Comparative Governance under Colonial Rule*, Public Choice, 174 (2018), DOI: 10.1007/s11127-018-0499-3.
[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000).
[18] Chakrabarty, *ibid.*, p. 16.
[19] Philipp Dann and Florian Jeßberger, *Reflexive Globalisation, Law and Placemaking*, Verfassungsblog, 05.02.2026, https://verfassungsblog.de/reflexive-globalisation-law-and-placemaking/, last accessed 09.09.2026, DOI: 10.59704/f8e7edc0c8a2351b.

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