

The politics of the African Great Lakes: culture, strategies and constraints

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Abstract

The study of politics in the African Great Lakes is not exempt from the epistemological hardships that often accompany the study of Africa more broadly: *de-historicisation* and simplification, analogies with the West, a decontextualized *miserabilism* and poverty porn. Internal political processes, often visible from a bottom-up perspective, allow us to understand socio-political transformation and the meanings that local citizens give to them. In the case of the Great Lakes region, it is a question of understanding the complexity of politics through the articulation of the historical heritage in the *long durée*, the strategies adopted by the elites in power and the national, regional and international strategies that influence them. It is necessary to abandon an analogic, exotic, culturalist or romantic point of view – that still marks a way of understanding African dynamics that still bears the legacy of colonialism. Such an improved understanding calls for a rigorous analysis comparing different ideological visions and theories of realities with the reality on the ground in the Great Lakes region. This article tries to accomplish this complex by necessary tasks through an analysis of: the state, democracy and elections first, then of the administrations and decentralisation and finally of the political participation of civil society and its expression in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

1. Introduction: writing about the African Great Lakes region today

The Great Lakes region of Africa includes four countries: Burundi, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. The term was first employed at the end of the XIX century by British explorers in search of the source of the Nile river. The terms “African Great Lakes” (*Afrique des Grands Lacs*) and “Great Lakes of Africa” (*Grands Lacs d’Afrique*) became established during the late 1970s - preferred over alternative appellations such as “interlacustrine Africa” (*Afrique interlacustre*) (Chrétien, 2000). The study of this homogenous block that is called the African Great Lakes calls for a definition of the similarities justifying the grouping together of four countries, which are themselves very heterogeneous. These similarities are illustrated by three factors: cultural similarities linked to the thousands of years of sub-regional exchanges facilitated by the geographical proximity of the countries; a shared political and historical past dating back to the early colonial period; a set of political regimes, institutions and legal systems that are rooted in the same global model.

With regards to cultural similarities, the Great Lakes region has a tradition of commercial exchanges that are thousands of years old, taking place in a context of highly organised states tied by alliances and marriages between their rulers (Ibid.). These regional exchanges were taking place within the same cultural community and may explain the similarities of customary narratives, practices and logic in the region (Amani, 2007; Mworoha, 1977). As for the shared political history, the countries of the Great Lakes were colonised following the Berlin Conference (November 1884 – February 1885) until the 1960s (Wesseling, 2002). In Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC the Belgian administration attempted to homogenise the legal systems and practices from the twenties (The Kingdom of Belgium, 1925). Uganda, which belonged to the British sphere of influence following the Anglo-German agreement of 1890, was governed through a system of indirect rule that used the Buganda Kingdom as its base of expansion towards the rest of Uganda (Morris and Read, 1966). As for political regimes and institutional and juridical postcolonial processes, although political reforms in the different countries happened at different times, their rationale was still that of supporting a one-party system. All countries were concerned with consolidating the authoritarianism of the ruling party. The donor countries mostly dictated the political and legislative changes that followed the one-party era (as from the nineties): democratisation, good governance and economic growth (Coussy, 2006).

As for the rest of Africa, the risk of any political analysis in the Great Lake is that of overlooking the gap between the letter of political reforms and their application (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). Another risk, in trying to understand this gap, is to adopt a culturalist approach (Chabal and Daloz, 1999) or a strategical approach that finds its main explanation in the survival of the elites (Goldsmith, 2001). While the culturalist approach tries to understand the decisions of the ruling classes through local customs and norms, the strategical approach sees those decisions as part of a strategy aimed at maintaining and consolidating power.

For instance, a large body of literature on politics in the Great Lakes is rooted in a culturalist approach explaining patrimonial dynamics in the region as part of a precolonial heritage. These studies draw parallels between patrimonialism in pre and post-colonial times (Callaghy, 1984). For some, patrimonialism in the post-colonial state is only the continuation of pre-colonial practices, with colonialism only being a short parenthesis (M'Bokolo, 1985). To justify the authoritarianism of the post-colonial elites, African rulers have often referred to the discretionary power of the "traditional chief" (Ackson and Rosberg, 1982). According to some, patrimonialism is an inheritance of colonial rule that has become a culture (Gazibo, Thiriot, 2009). The inheritance of patrimonialism depends on the different forms of colonisation, be it indirect as it was in Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC (Lanneay, 2014; Gérard-Libois, Benoit Verhaegen, 1985) or indirect as in the case of Uganda (Iliffe, 2002; Lwanfa-Luwiygo, 1987).

Another example is that of ethnicity, a crucial factor to understand political developments in the Great Lakes of Africa since independence (Lemarchand, 1970; 2009; Nyombi & Kaddu, 2015). Certain studies have treated ethnicity as rooted in pre-colonial socio-political organisations (Reyntjens, 1995; Quinn, 2004). Others see ethnicity as a colonial invention aimed at categorising and managing indigenous people, and to divide them so to better rule them (Chrétien, Guichaoua, 1989; Lwanga-Luwiygo, 1987).

A closer look at culturalist perspectives reveals their reductive nature (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1992). Doubtlessly, the discourse of certain African rulers of the postcolonial period mobilised the appeal of traditional power. It is the case, for instance, of the "*présent cheftraditionnell*" during the Mobutu regime in the DRC – 1964 – 1997 (Kabuya Kalala et Tshiunza Mbiye, 2003), during the rule of Idi Amin in Uganda – 1971 -1979 (Kivengere, 1977) or under Habyarimana – 1973 – 1994. In this category also fall the discourse on Agaciro – pride in the Rwandan tradition – that has now been used by Rwandan president Paul Kagame for a number of years (Panait, Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2014) or the idea of "traditional guarantor of farmers' prosperity" that Burundian president Nkuruziza try to promote for himself in Burundi (Van Acker, 2018). However, these narratives are of a strategic character, and the imaginary and memories to which they appeal are carefully selected to serve the interests of the elites in power. Moreover, many culturalist studies have identified the link between the Belgian and English colonisation, authoritarianism in the colonies and their effects on post-colonial patrimonialism (Lwanga-Luwiygo, 1987; Mbembe, 2003). Many of these authors also acknowledge the role of local-level dynamics in the implementation of policy, and their effects on the social systems they inherited, be they colonial or post-colonial (Mbembe, 2000; Cooper, 2005). With regards to political organisation, for example, colonisation introduced the concept of the modern nation-state in the African Great Lakes. During the post-colonial period, this produced a "dual authority" (Skalar, 1993), a form of social organisation in which the state is superposed to the ancient kingdoms. Such a dualism was possible in the DRC and Uganda in force of the continuous reconfiguration of the relations of power acted by local players who tried to mould the system to fit their origins, interests and strategies. At the same time, the implementation of dual authority did not survive the post-colonial period in Rwanda and Burundi (Lemarchand, 1970), despite the fact that customary institutions – such as the *Abunzi* in Rwanda and the *Bashingantahe* in Burundi – survived after being subject to substantial transformation (Kohlhagen, 2010; Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2016).

The social and political concepts often used to describe politics in the Great Lakes such as ethnicity (Bayart, 1996), neo-patrimonialism (Médard, 1991) and "politics of the belly" (*la politique du ventre*) (Bayart, 1989) are constituted of both ruptures and continuities. The ruptures can be explained by the elites' need to imagine new strategies to adapt to internal political developments, and to respond to an ever-changing international environment (Gizabo, Thiriot, 2009). However, such ruptures are also always seen in continuity with hereditary models which are often re-imagined to suit the interests of those in power. The elites' strategies are continuously under pressure from the interior as well as from the exterior, which demands new difficult adaptations, strange alliances and risky arrangements.

The study of politics in the Great Lakes should always begin with an epistemological endeavour, so to avoid significant risks such as de-historicisation, generalisation and simplification, analogies with the West, de-contextualised pauperism, porno-poverty etc. Subsequently, it is crucial to investigate local political process, which are often visible only from the bottom-up and which are internal to different African countries. This allows for a better understanding of local evolutions and transformations, and the meaning that local citizens give to them. Moreover, such an approach allows the scholar to understand politics as a result of the articulation between historical heritage in the *long durée*, the strategies adopted by those in power, national, regional and international constraints constraining their actions and other dynamics resulting from the interaction of local actors with other structurally determined elements.

2. State, democracy, elections: heritage, strategies and constraints

The study of politics is concerned with the question of living together, and in the Great Lakes of Africa, this often implies the question of the state. Particularly, understanding politics in the region calls for an appraisal of the way the state worked before 1990 (a) and of the democratic and electoral forms that it has taken subsequently (b).

- *The state before 1990: militarisation, authoritarianism and one-party rule*

As elsewhere in Africa, politics in the Great Lakes is often understood starting from the question of the state, and particularly from a Weberian vision of the state (Weber, 2003a; 2003b). Thus, unpacking the question of statehood means evaluating the state effectiveness in two areas: the monopoly of violence and the distinction between the public and the private sphere (Mitchel, 1991). On this regard, the literature on politics in the Great Lakes often asks the question of whether the state succeeded in its mission to ensure prosperity and security to its citizens through the effective management of the two areas mentioned above (Collier, 2007). The same literature often highlights the lack of inherent authority of African states, often linked to the lack of material means (Anderson, 2004) or to the personal will of the ruling classes to maintain a situation of state inefficacy so to pursue their own political interests (Englebert, Tull, 2008). According to others, the inefficacy of African states is due to the interference of actors who are external to the state, at the national (Herbst, Mills, 2010) or the international level (Moyo, 2009). At the national level, these are often armed political opponents (Menkhaus, Vlassenroot, 2008). At the international level the factors are varied, but the first mentioned is often the very idea of statehood, which is imported from abroad (Badie, 2002). Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) required by international financial institutions – especially during the 1980s – have also been singled out among the reasons for the weakening of the state and its inability to effectively implement public policy (De Herdt, 2001).

Generally, when the state does not fulfil the Weberian requirements for statehood it is described as failed or weak (Collier, 2007). Authors concerned with state weakness often find the origin of it within sectarian struggles and patrimonialism within state structures contributing, which contribute to the progressive weakening of the state (Englebert, Tull, 2008). Other scholars have seen in the non-adherence to the Weberian model a sign of the transformation of African states towards a model of statehood that is diverging from the Weberian model (De Herdt, 2011). According to these authors, often the political forces fighting at the local level do not aim to weaken nor to destroy the state, but to integrate its structures (Migdal, 2001). Under this light, the production of legitimacy and political authorities in such state formations happen through a process that differs from the ones identified by Weber (Olivier de Sardan, 2009). Fighting parties may reconstruct the state based on their own culture and experiences, the context they live in and the configuration of forces at the local level, giving rise both to opportunities and constraints. It is evident that there is a need for putting the state back in the historical context.

In the Great Lakes, the need to historicise the state brings us to analyse three main factors. Firstly, the often overtly political role played by national armies in the endeavour of protecting their political chiefs. Secondly, there is a need to understand the causes that led to authoritarian state forms in the aftermath

of national independence. Finally, it is crucial to understand how the struggle for independence led to the creation of one-party rule within state structures that are the legacy of colonisation (Gazibo, Thiriot 2009).

Studying the role of the army in politics, which in the Great Lakes became dominant during the three decades following independence, allows us to understand contemporary political dynamics. This period is marked by violence and several military coups: in Burundi in 1966, 1976, 1987 and 1996; in Uganda in 1966, 1971, 1979, 1981; in the DRC in 1965, 1997, 2001; in Rwanda in 1973 and 1994. During the whole period, the lines between the military and the political sphere were blurred (Thiriot, 2008). Thus, authoritarianism was based on an alliance between military and civilian elements, which leads to the politicisation of armed forces” (Gazibo, Thirior, 2009: 35)¹. This is evident in Burundi and Uganda, where military personnel gained access to political positions. Throughout the whole region we also witness the "militarisation of politics"² (Ibid.). Insofar as the use of coercive force was an option available to politicians through clientelist relations with the armed forces - structures that, in the four countries, were directly inherited from the colonial armies (Martin, 1979). Such armed forces were permeable to the rest of society and subjected to the same political dynamics that penetrated the broader social context: patrimonialism, nepotism etc. (Dabiezies, 2001). National armies played a significant role in all the countries of the Great Lakes and would represent, up until the 1990s, a common modality of political change (Chazan et al. 1985).

In each country, independence was followed by the rise of armed rebellions, which were either tamed by the state (in Burundi until 2001, in the DRC until 1997 and in Rwanda until 1994) or that managed to seize state power (in Uganda in 1997). One of the consequences of the presence of armed group is that military participation in politics became commonplace in the region, and still is today. The explication that is often provided for the participation of the military in politics in Africa lies with the corporatism of the army as a powerful and hegemonic institution, and one that allows for social mobility and political change (Martin, 1990).

Second, during the post-colonial years preceding the 1990s, authoritarianism was the norm in the political systems of the Great Lakes region. Authoritarianism in Africa has been interpreted through a varied set of lenses. Culturalist readings of authoritarianism have considered it a consequence of the lack of democracy in pre-colonial regimes (Bourmaud, 1997). As mentioned above, this is part of a narrative often employed by chiefs of government in the Great Lakes to give legitimacy to both their authoritarianism and their longevity in power (cf. narratives of the “traditional chiefs”). In other cases, as in those of Idi Amin in Uganda and of Mobutu in the DRC, the register of unity and nation-building was adopted. This type of authoritarianism finds its justification in the need to build a nation-state that will replace the foreign-bound colonial state (M'Bokolo, 1985: 334). As in Uganda and the DRC, this nationalist discourse was instrumental in fighting tribalism and secessionist tensions – whether foreign powers supported them or not. Tribalism and secessionism will also be used to justify the need for a one-party system.

The reasons for authoritarianism mentioned above often allowed the ruling classes to maintain their grasp on power and to put in place a cult of personality of the leader (in the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda under Habyarimana) and the idea of a return to African authenticity (especially in the DRC). Authoritarianism, initially a means to an end, becomes an end unto itself, instrumental for the self-conservation of power structures (Linz, 2006). As power became personalised, the cult of personality became a way to legitimise authoritarianism (Asso, 1976). In cases such as Uganda under Milton Obote (1966-1971) and Rwanda under Kayibanda (1962-1973,) the personalisation of power was to be expected, as those leaders guided the countries on the path to independence (Conac, 1983). However, the generations of chiefs of state that would replace the leaders of the independence movement (Mobutu in the DRC, Micombero in Burundi, Habyarimana in Rwanda and Amin in Uganda) suffered from a legitimacy gap, that would be filled by the cult of personality (William, 1992). However, because of the

¹ “Lapoliticisation des forces armées”

² “La militarisation du politique”

personal nature of power and of the levels of coercion that it required, authoritarianism will be only partially institutionalised in the Great Lakes. Forms of neo-patrimonialism fostering corruption and clientelism were always favoured over blunt coercion (Médard, 1999).

Thirdly, with regards to one-party rule, as elsewhere in Africa, the ruling parties in the Great Lakes managed to build an institutional armour that enabled authoritarianism and the control and political mobilisation of society (Scaeder, 2000). The idea of the “traditional chief” greatly supported one-party rule in the Great Lakes, but it was not the only logic underpinning it. For instance, the idea of the “lifelong traditional chief” may explain the one-party rule of UPRONA in Burundi (1968-1993) of the MPR in the DRC (1964-1990); of the ANS in Uganda (1966–2005) and the MRD in Rwanda (1962-1994). However, the one-party rule may also be explained as a strategy for the ruling elites to maintain their power (Chazan et al., 1985), as a colonial legacy that allowed for the complete control of society (Young, 1994) or as a consequence of the Cold War (N'Dimina-Mougala, 2009; Herbst, 2012). A closer look at the political events of the region shows that all the factors mentioned above played a role, some of them more than others at different historical junctions.

One-party rule enshrined an exclusionary-party system, where power is reserved for an avant-gardist and supposedly unite elite (Bratton, Van de Walle, 1997)³. In such exclusionary parties, power is strongly centralised but with different modalities according to whether it is highly personalised (as in the DRC under Mubutu or in Uganda under Amin) or regionalised (as in Burundi, Uganda, and in Rwanda under Habyarimana). As elsewhere in Africa (Gazabo and Thiot, 2009) authoritarianism was commonplace in the Great Lakes between 1960 and 1990. If we want to find the deep system of legitimisation of these authoritarian regimes, we must look beyond the patrimonialism and the coercion on which they are funded. There is a need to consider the narratives based on the ‘mistic’, an authoritative source of legitimisation for Mobutu in the DRC and Amin in Uganda.

Moreover, authoritarianism in the Great Lakes suffered from a lack of institutionalisation, due to the high levels of corruption, clientelism and to the personalisation of power (Jackson, Rosberg, 1982). The lack of institutionalisation is also the reason why the parties in power could never obtain exclusive control of the political space. They adapted and changed to accommodate internal struggles or external pressures. These dynamics have often been referred to as “popular modes of political action” (Chazan, 1988) or as “the revenge of African societies” (Bayart, 1983), and will form the basis for future democratic aspirations and political change in reaction to an aging system that could not deliver its promises of security and development.

- *Democracy and elections since 1990: new constraints and adaptations*

Following 1990, all the four states in the Great Lakes of African are born out of military coups. In Uganda and the DRC, the presidential guard became more powerful than the national army becoming the guarantee of authoritarian regimes and a counterbalance to the army (Frazer, 1995). The increasing degree of militarisation will give rise to political systems where political transitions are also military transitions (Bratton, Van de Walle, 1997). In Uganda, the leading actor would be president Museveni's national army while in Laurent Désiré Kabila's DRC, in Rwanda and Burundi the stage was taken by armed rebel groups. Each one of the chiefs of government currently in power in the four countries was at a time a military chief that took part in an armed rebellion. Each of them considers their country to be democracies, despite the amount of coercion and patrimonialism that characterises their regimes and the length of their own stay in power (32 years for Museveni in Uganda, 24 years for Kagame in Rwanda, 17 years for Kabila in the DRC and 13 years for Nkuruziza in Burundi).

With regards to the period before 1990, we can find the roots of politics in the Great Lakes at the junction between the colonial legacy and endogenous post-colonial dynamics – such as the political role of the armed forces, authoritarianism and one-party systems (Gazabo, 2006: 57). Starting from 1990, an additional factor shaping the context was democratic opening. The literature on democracy in Africa

³ Contrary to inclusionary parties, that can mobilise larger constituencies and have a degree of internal pluralism allowing for a certain amount of competition (Bratton, Van de Walle, 1997)

develops during the seventies and the eighties, when the question of democracy is generally considered from a structuralist standpoint (Van de Walle, 2009) that postulates a causal link between economic development and democratisation (Seymour Martin Lipset, 1959). According to such school of thought, African countries will progressively democratise if authoritarian regimes can provide a sufficient level of growth and development (Przeworsky et al. 1997, 2002). However, this structuralist reading of history fails to explain the apparition of a wave of democratisation in Africa (Huntington, 1991), which pushed the debate to focus on the role of individual actors and institutions in the democratic transitions (Lemarchand, 1988). On the contrary, another strand of literature, trying to link political transitions and patrimonialism, argue that that political transitions, or the demand for them, are a result of the weaknesses of the power structures that engender contestation and change (Van de Walle, 2009: 145).

In the Great Lakes democratic transitions have been significantly impacted by a patrimonialism turned political clientelism, by informal politics and the appropriation of state resources and their strategic redistribution to the country's elites (Lemarchand, 1988: 142). However, it is important also to notice that the deterioration of the power structures and their continuous failing to deliver on their promises precipitated a series of democratic demands, even before the international post-Cold War context of the nineties. Resistance, from both within and outside the regimes, played a crucial role in the transitions of the nineties, without necessarily being only concerned with "patrimonial and opportunistic struggle for the control of resources" (Van de Walle, 2009: 145). This was the case for identity-based pressure groups in Burundi (the Hutus), for the armed resistance in Rwanda, in Uganda and the DRC, and for the informal opposition groups in the DRC. Some of those groups revendicated democratic political participation and a government inspired by democratic, at times communist, ideas.

Moreover, it seems ostentatious to argue that democratisation in the Great Lakes was merely superficial and that it did not have any profound effects on the fundamental political dynamics of the region, including their clientelist and patrimonial character (Bayard et al. 1999). This hypothesis presupposes that, being imposed from outside (Mappa, 1995; Badie, 1992) democracy is only a façade to the same neo-patrimonialist logics (Bayard, 2000). This is a problematic hypothesis with regards to the Great Lakes. With regards to elections, for instance, Gazibo (2003) has shown that the introduction of formal rules influences political behaviour. In fact, in a long-term perspective, the fact that elections – as a way of exercising democracy- are nowadays acknowledged by citizens as necessary in the Great Lakes is itself a significant democratic advancement. The real effects of elections have been impacted by the predominance of one-party systems and by the armed rebellions and civil wars that have affected the region since the nineties (see: Mamdani, 1999; Reyntjens, 2014), and which are partially ongoing (Vlassenroot, Verweijen, 2017). The end of the war in the region strongly moved the four countries close to the idea of "liberal peace" (Boutros, 1992; Curtis, 2012), in both political and economic terms. Liberal peace was formally consecrated by peace agreements in Burundi (2000 onwards) and the DRC (2001 onwards) or implemented merely after a long period of political instability in Rwanda (1994 onwards) and Uganda (1995 onwards). The first democratic elections took place in 1990 (in Burundi) and 2000 (DRC, Uganda and Rwanda).

The study of elections in Africa during the nineties mobilised a conceptual framework from the previous decades. According to such framework, the democratic character of elections can be characterised according to specific criteria: competitiveness (democratic elections), the dominant party (elections that are democratic in appearance but that are actually manipulated by the ruling party, which being in charge of the state apparatus organises its re-election), limited choice of the candidates (as in elections in which there is only a choice between candidates of the same party) or by acclamation (when there is no choice between candidates, parties or policies) (Hayward, 1987). Because of the presence of multipartitism, this conceptual framework only applies to the Great Lakes with regards to the first two cases: the *competitiveness of elections* and the *dominant party*.

In the Great Lakes of Africa multipartism has allowed, in theory, to open competition during the elections. The Burundian elections of 1993 were competitive, but they had little impact on the country due to the military coup that took place just a few months later (Vandenginst, 2009). The election that took place in Burundi in 2005 were democratic, but those that took place in 2010 and 2015 were more

likely of the *dominant party* type. Those in power used their control of state resources and violence to ensure a democratic façade while manipulating the elections to be re-elected (Palmans, 2009). The situation was similar in Rwanda, in Uganda and the DRC. In Rwanda, during the 2003, 2010 and 2017 elections the ruling party chose to “cordon off political space” muzzling the opposition, civil society and the independent press (Reyntjens, 2019: 3012; Sundaramm, 2016). In Uganda, the multipartism introduced in 2005 allowed for the organisation of elections in 2006, 2011 and 2016. However, the democratic experience of 1996 would not be repeated given the “considerable fraud and irregularities, the frequent arrests of opposition politicians and the intimidation of the electorate” (Reyntjens, 2018: 312). The same strategies were used in both the 2006 and 2011 elections in the DRC. Since then, the government in power has refused to organise elections that they fear they will lose.

It is possible to consider multipartism, and the organisation of elections as a democratic achievement insofar as the injunction of organising them comes with some pressures. Such pressures can provide a leeway into changing arbitrary political practices and open avenues for negotiation in favour of the political opposition and civil society. This was the case for the 2005 elections in Burundi and the 2006 elections in the DRC, but it was not the case for the 2010, 2011 and 2015 elections in Burundi, and even less so for the elections organised in Rwanda and Uganda. The principle of organising elections to win them seems to apply to these countries, a principle that is well served by an authoritarian system that undoes the constitutional balances imposing a limitation to the number of mandates the executive can cover. The four countries of the Great Lakes have “*de facto or de jure suppressed these limitations*” in other words “*through constitutional reforms in Uganda and Rwanda, through the interpretation of the constitution in Burundi and the non-organisation of presidential elections in the DRC*” (Ibid., 309). Democracy in the Great Lakes is a modality of formal electoral politics where the party in power often wins the elections because it also finances and controls the process (Lindberg, 2005).

Moreover, when the Composite Democracy Index proposed by Reyntjens (2016) is used, the four countries in the Great Lakes attain a score below the average for sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, even if we accept the hypothesis that formal rules may influence political behaviour (Gazibo, 2003,) it is not clear if this influence of democratic rules on behaviour is a positive one. The case of the Great Lakes shows that actors can often adapt to the requirements of new rules to achieve their objective of gaining power at all costs. In the four countries, elections have become necessary as a source of state legitimation and regulation, but the question of their legitimacy remains. Despite their limitations, elections remain a vital source of legitimisation and de-legitimisation for the elites in power and for those who seek political for. This is an essential issue, often overlooked by culturalist and strategic approaches.

With regards to legitimisation and de-legitimisation, it is essential to consider the role played by the international community in the African Great Lakes since the nineties, and the growing role of regional organisations since 2000, namely the South African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), the East African Community (EAC) and the African Union (UA). Notwithstanding their internal weaknesses (financial, technical, institutional etc.) these organisations remain today one of the ways through which the elites in power legitimise certain decisions, particularly when opposing international pressure or to set up networks of influence so to maintain their power (ICG, 2016).

Besides the different forms of violence and limitations used by the parties in power to win the elections, there remains the question of the ethnic and tribal mobilisation; a common strategy deployed to gain legitimacy and to win elections. In Burundi, ethnic mobilisation was used in 2015 to legitimise the third unconstitutional mandate of the Burundian president (Van Acker, 2018; Paviotti, 2018). In Rwanda, even though the official narratives reject any reference to ethnicity, the political opposition continues to see the Hutu ethnic groups as excluded from the electoral process and power more broadly – despite some formal representation in politics⁴. In the DRC, regional, linguistic, and tribal cleavages continue to mark political dynamics and elections at all levels, to the point that it is impossible today to be elected

⁴ See Afrique des Grands Lacs. Annuaire, volumes from 1997, available at: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/great-lakes-africa-centre/publications/yearbook/>, last retrieved 2 October 2018

outside what is referred to as “*sa base*” (which can be regional, linguistic or tribal). The situation is similar in Uganda, where a certain tribal regionalism dominated in the West and the centre, to the expense of the North (Hunt, 2014).

The ethnic and tribal analysis of politics should be complexified and relativized for two reasons. First, ethnic and tribal issues are articulated by actors whose strategies also considers other cleavages, such as a religious cleavage (in Uganda and to a certain extent in Burundi and the DRC). Such strategies are implemented in a context that includes its own social dynamics, often linked to issues of access to resources and class. In the case of Uganda, Mamdani shows how questions of economics, politics and identity can be enmeshed (Mamdani, 1976). On the other hand, it appears clear that these “divisions are always counterbalanced by alliances” (Martin, 1986). Because political competition must always adopt a national dimension, they require alliances and coalitions “despite of where the real gravitational centre lies” (Ibid.), generating the necessity for tribal, ethnic, religious and ideological alliances.

Finally, the evaluation of democratic advancement in the Great Lakes region of Africa can vary according to whether a long-term or a short-term perspective is adopted. In the first case, what appears is a *Deja-vu* in which political actors are continuously trying to appropriate formal rules so to produce the results they see fit. According to some, this means that there never was a democratic transition but only mere forms of alternation “of unstable, imperfect democratic periods and more autocratic phases” (Van de Walle, 2009). This is because more stable democracies require some structural conditions for their viability, such as significant economic growth and strong institutions, which are absent in the four countries (Carothers, 2002). In the second case, the case can be made that despite the elites’ capacity for adaptation to the new democratic rules, democracy in the Great Lakes has provided an essential space for the opposition and civil society. This space allows them to exercise a counter-power that is necessary to support and strengthen the democratic process, as illustrated by the following sections.

3. Administration and decentralisation: weaknesses, gaps and new arenas

Democracy and politics are not limited to the state, formal process of democratisation or elections. They also concern issues of administration, public policy and decentralisation. Issues of administration are important in the Great Lakes, as they allow us to understand the apparatus that, within modern states, is supposed to serve as the interface between the administrations and those it governs (Adamolekun, 1999). It also allows us to explore the linkages that exist between the administration as a single tool for disciplining the population and the nature of the state apparatus (Darbon, Crouzel, 2009). In other words, authoritarianism, one-party rule, the militarisation of politics, patrimonialism and democracy in the Great Lakes all materialise in the administrative apparatus. While understanding the administration also means understanding the emanation of political power, this cannot neglect the links between the administration, colonisation and the developmentalist ideas that came with it (Ibid.).

In the Great Lakes of Africa, the administration of the post-colonial state is an inheritance of the colonial administration. In Uganda, governed by indirect rule during colonisation, the local population was prepared to some degree to take the reins of the administration after independence (Thompson, 2003). This was not the case in Burundi, in the DRC and in Rwanda where the Belgian colonial system did not train public servants (Lemarchand, 1970), resulting in serious administrative dysfunctions in those countries. The situation was aggravated by the fact that at the moment of independence the Belgian colonies were in full administrative and economic crisis, which they bequeathed to the newly independent countries (Pétillon, 1967).

During the sixties and seventies, a series of reforms were implemented that put the administration of the state at the core of issues of development and democracy (Darbon, Crouzel 2009). However, the authoritarian system, coupled with patrimonialism and nepotism, would take advantage of the years preceding the petrol crisis of the seventies to consolidate its power. Only during the eighties, the reform of the public sector would focus on the policy framework in which the administration existed. These programmes fostered an approach based on good governance and the respect of citizens' rights (Ibid.). The literature on such reforms in the Great Lakes shows their utter failure (Ssonko, 2008;

Bakand'Olinga, 2014; Niyungeko, 1999; Marysse, De Herdt, Ndayambaje, 1994). These studies point the finger to the World Bank, responsible for designing ill-suited reforms that weakened the already weak structures in place. Notwithstanding, it is impossible to neglect that the administration was already marked by strong politicisation, to the point that it has rivalled with politics, to which it should be subjected. It is enough to recall the role that both the local and national administration played in the massacres that took place in the region (Reyntjens, 2017).

Since the nineties and the 2000s, decentralisation became another critical feature of public administration in the Great Lakes. The decentralisation model complexified the relations between the government and the governed, but also how the political elites manipulate the administrations. The wave of decentralisation reforms that appeared in the nineties in Africa found an obstacle in the civil war in the DRC, in Burundi and Rwanda, and would only reach these countries in the 2000s. On the contrary, in Uganda the government started implementing decentralisation programmes as from 1993. Notwithstanding, changes would only take place after the 1995 Constitution and the 1997 law on local administration, conferring authorities and responsibilities to those entities (Saito, 2003).

Decentralisation is considered as the transfer of state attributions to territorial collectives or political institutions so that they can dispose of juridical power and financial autonomy (Tidjani Alou, 2009), thus appearing as an aspect of democratisation. However, for several reasons, the benefits of decentralisation in the Great Lakes have yet to be felt. At times, as in Burundi, decentralisation failed to bring about the local development envisioned because of a lack of means. In other cases, as in Uganda, local-level actors are kept from taking advantage of the opportunities offered from decentralisation to improve citizens' lives (Saito, 2003). In other cases, the central government is unwilling to leave any autonomy to decentralised structures as in the DRC (at the provincial level) and in Rwanda. At other times the central power is unwilling to organise elections for a local decentralisation, as in the DRC. Often, as in the DRC (at the provincial level) and Rwanda, decentralisation is a smokescreen for a multi-level system of administration without any autonomy at the local level. This is also the case, to a lesser extent, in Uganda. As the socio-anthropology of decentralisation in rural Africa and the Great Lakes has shown, decentralisation allowed the re-deployment of the state on the territory (Tidjani Alou, 2009). Within these new processes of building territorial control, the new phenomenon of local elected representatives represents a new opportunity for capture by the central government (Bierschenk, 2006).

Whether it is centralised, a multi-level administration or decentralised, public administration in the Great Lakes is always marked by a gap between formal and informal rules – as highlighted by the socio-anthropology of public space in Africa (Olivier de Sardan, 2009). Rwanda is often cited as an exception to this rule, as a result of a decade of efforts to improve its technocratic governance. However, questions remain about the sustainability of an administrative performance record that is often the result of a developmentalist-authoritarian character rather than of the institutions themselves (Ansoms et al. 2018). It is important to highlight that, to different degrees, the countries in the Great Lakes are still unable to ensure basic public services and to raise their population from poverty. The combination of elite patrimonialism since independence, the failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the eighties, and the political and the ethnic crisis that afflicted these countries during the nineties may explain the catastrophic situation they have inherited. In this context, it is often difficult for the ruling forces to find the means to finance their public services. For this reason, and to maintain their power within a patrimonial system except for Rwanda, governments may resort to indebtedness (Sindzingre, 2009). Moreover, because of their dependence on the export of primary commodities, the four countries are also vulnerable to the volatility of prices on the international market (Easterly, 2007).

4. Public expression, participation and civil society: politics from below

In order to understand politics in the Great Lakes, observers have adopted an essentially institutional perspective, privileging the study of the state, democracy, elections, the functioning of the administration and public participation. However, rarely an approach that considers how life and politics are produced from public expression and mobilisation is adopted when studying politics in the Great

Lakes (Mayrargue et Comi Toulabor, 2009). In other words, there is a need to adopt an approach that allows us to understand power through the articulation of public participation and expression in a given society (Badie and Hermet, 2001), going beyond the narratives of political institutions and their actors (Mayrargue, Toulabor, 2009). It is important to look at the “politics from below” that allows us to understand the viewpoint of those that are subjected to power (Bayart, Mbembe, Toulabor, 2017).

Since independence, the issue of public expression in the Great Lakes has been marked by authoritarianism. Political expression was strictly limited during the era of one-party rule and before 1990, as witnessed by the numerous cases of repression during this period. In the DRC, there has been a general decrease in the repression of public expression since the political transition, although the risks of repression for anyone opposing the establishment remain high during pre-electoral and electoral periods (Nyenyezi, Anrys, Rostagno, 2013). The situation is similar in Uganda, where repression reached its peak under Amin to then progressively allow for a relative opening since the rise of Museveni to power (Kivengere, 1977). However, the space for public expression has shrunk with the arrival of multipartism in 2005 (Reyntjens, 2018). In Burundi, since the signing of the Arusha Agreement in 2000, the country has been considered as an example regarding freedom of expression (Vandeginste, 2009). Authoritarianism in Burundi has been on the rise since the period preceding the 2010 elections and reached a peak after the crisis linked to the choice of president Nkuruziza to run for a third mandate (Niyonkuru, Nyenyezi 2018). On the contrary in Rwanda, as we have seen, an authoritarian system was put in place immediately after the genocide (Ingelaere, 2017), justified by the need to pacify and rebuild a country that had been devastated by genocide. However, with the gradual rebuilding of the country has come the consolidation of an authoritarian system which does not tolerate any expression contrary to the official narrative (Sundaram, 2016).

The issue of political participation raises the question of civil society in the countries of the Great Lakes. As in the rest of the African continent, the wave of democratisation of the nineties brought with it the notion of civil society. The organisations that were born out of this historical moment constituted an essential object of research in the debate on democratic transitions (Otayek, 2009). Civil society would be considered a crucial actor in the process of democratisation and for the pursuit of economic development (Seligman, 1992: 10). It is important to highlight that at their inception, debates over civil society in Africa were focussed on settling whether the existence of civil society was possible without the conditions that, in the West, ensured the resolution of the tensions between individual interests and the commons (Otayek, 2009). An essential part of the literature considers that the idea of genuine civil society in Africa is a deception, as the society and the state are so enmeshed to become indistinguishable (Badie, 1992: 116). There would be a lack of "differentiation between the public and private sphere, individualisation of social relations and the primacy of horizontal solidarities over vertical allegiances" (Ibid.).

Such a perspective appears problematic because of its euro-centric and normative posture. Several studies have acknowledged the importance of civil society in Africa for the process of democratic transition and consolidation, even though civil society may still be in an embryonal, “gelatinous” state (Otayek, 2009). Moreover, in the Great Lakes, modern social institutions are not reticent to face power in order to claim the respect of the rule of law, one of the preconditions to democracy. This is evident even in very repressive contexts, such as in Rwanda after 1994 and in Burundi after 2010.

However, it is important to note the significant financial, technological and often ideological dependence of local civil society in the Great Lakes on international donors and NGOs. This dependence is the fruit of a collaboration that was born during the nineties, at a time when many actors saw civil society as the only alternative solution to the crisis of the post-colonial authoritarian state, the latter being doubly guilty: for failing to bring about both national unity and the democratic transition (Baker, 1999).

As a result, democracy and civil society become indissoluble, which also explains the disagreement and hostility between civil society and the government in power in the countries of the Great Lakes. While in the DRC this rivalry is expressed in repression, in Rwanda and increasingly in Burundi, civil society

is more and more considered not as a counter-balance but as a partner that must align with the vision of those in power and must submit to them.

5. Conclusion: resistance in the *postcolony*

As shown above, culturalist and strategic readings of politics in Africa, and the Great Lake, in particular, suffer from three main pitfalls. They fail to understand country-specific variations (Mudimbe, 1988), the practical norms that rule the gap between formal norms and practices (Olivier de Sardan, 2009; Lund, 2009) and the ruptures and continuities that they entail (Mbembe, 2000). Understanding politics in the Great Lakes of Africa today means understanding its pre-colonial and colonial legacy, but also the post-colonial dynamics (Bourmaud, 2006) made of strategies and constraints, without neglecting the ruptures, continuities and hybridisations. Politics in the Great Lakes is complicated, which is also a reason for the often reductive formulas used to understanding it, which often refers to imported, de-contextualised and imposed models.

Politics also bears the question of living together, and of the ways of doing it, and that of power. It is possible to read politics in Africa as the history of long durée of the institutionalisations of modes of governing people and things. Besides those modes of government, it is interesting to look at the forms of 'refusal' or contestation that try to limit different forms of power, and at forms of expression of freedom that keep challenging power structures. Such an investigation allows for understanding how in the Great Lakes, despite authoritarianism and its different forms of violence and coercion, power structures continue to be challenged, and at times constrained and hampered. Such contestations can take place within or without the circles of power. Researching such forms of contestation is important, as it allows us to evaluate their potential to change or subvert larger, existing structures.

Finally, it remains crucial to conceptualise the countries of the Great Lakes starting from the notion of the "post-colony". This notion implies "the identity of a specific historical trajectory: that of societies which have recently come out from the experience of colonisation, the latter being understood as a violent relationship above all." (Mbembe, 2000: 139-140). This notion allows us to study the contemporary effects of such violence in the African Great Lakes, a group of countries of recent colonisation. It does not imply a simple historicization of the political, but a call for understanding how the violence inherited from the past is restructured in the production of politics. As we have seen, the post-colonial identity of the countries of the Great Lakes must be placed in a specific context. However, this should not mean ignoring the international context that strongly influences national politics: globalisation and the need for institutional adaptation, regionalism (the AU, EAC, CIRGL, CEPGL) and their impact on economic and political reforms. All these factors play a role in understanding the decisions, actions and discourses of political elites in the Great Lakes of Africa.

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