

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE AFRICAN EARLY STATE *

Henri J. M. Claessen
University of Leiden

The aim of this paper¹ is to investigate whether African Early States south of the Sahara show organizational features that can be labelled typically or specifically African. To reach this goal the concept of Early State will first have to be discussed briefly, and then the question of the specificity of features must be dealt with. After having in this way defined our terms, ethnographic data on a number of African states will be presented and compared.

1. The Early State

The Early State is a concept used to denote the state in the precapitalistic era of the evolution of political society. It is the first stage of statehood, and can be defined as:

The centralized socio-political organization for the regulation of social relations in a complex, stratified society divided into at least two basic strata, or emergent social classes — viz. the rulers and the ruled —, whose relations are characterized by political dominance of the former and tributary obligation of the latter, legitimized by a common ideology of which reciprocity is the basic principle (Claessen & Skalník 1978: 640).

This definition is based upon a comparative analysis of 21 case studies of precapitalistic state formations, a sample which included African and Polynesian, as well as Asian, European and American

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cases. The analysis of the cases made possible the construction of a structural model of the early state, based upon the characteristics which scored high in the comparisons (Claessen & Skalník 1978: ch. 25; 637 ff.). Some of the characteristics of this model may be presented here.

The position of the ruler — the head of the early state — is based upon a mythical charter and a genealogy which connects him with the supernatural forces. He is also considered a benevolent figure, a source of gifts, remunerations and offerings. He is surrounded by a court as well as a body-guard.

The aristocracy comprises members of the ruler's family, clan or lineage heads, and the incumbents of high offices. Private ownership of land is a rare phenomenon, and does not seem to be of importance for the attainment of high social status in the early state.

The ideology of the early state appears to be based upon the concept of reciprocity: all categories of subjects provide the ruler with goods and services (tribute and tax), while the ruler for his part is responsible for his subjects' protection, law and order, and the bestowal of benevolence. The priesthood supports the state ideology.

The actual production of food is limited within only certain social groups, and the access to material resources is unequal. The upper stratum generally has tribute as its main source of income. Tax, however, is paid by all social categories, though varying from one category to another in quantity and quality.

Social inequality seems to be based first and foremost upon birth, with the relative distance from the ruler's lineage constituting the defining principle.

For the government of the early state a system of delegation of tasks and powers is evolved. There are numerous functionaries fulfilling tasks in the governmental apparatus. "General functionaries" are found especially on the regional and local level, while "specialists" are found rather more on the national level. Though, ideally, only the ruler has the right to issue laws and decrees, many other people exercise a formal or informal influence upon affairs and developments.

A possible explanation for the amazing degree of uniformity in the structure of early states can be found in the consideration that the problems posed by the necessity of organizing groups of people with different access to the means of production, the requirements of communication and organizing defence, and the need

to find ideological justifications for the given situation, are in all cases very much alike. Apparently only a limited set of solutions to these problems was functional, or, at least, appeared to be better, or more efficient than others. Where these "solutions" did not develop the early state did not develop at all, or collapsed very soon. Where they did — either by borrowing, or by local development — the early states were remarkably stable structures.

This is not to say that the early state is a kind of static monolith. The analysis of the 21 cases also demonstrated the existence of internal dynamics (Claessen & Skalník 1978: ch. 26, and 638 ff.; cf. Claessen 1979: 184 ff.). To describe the differences in organizational complexity, caused by these internal dynamics, three types of early states were distinguished: the inchoate, the typical and the transitional (Claessen & Skalník 1978: 589 ff., 640 ff.). This typology reflects the degree of development of such aspects as: trade and markets, mode of succession to important functions (hereditary versus appointment), the occurrence of private ownership of land, the judicial system, the taxation system, and the way of remuneration of functionaries.

The African states in the Early State sample (Ankole, Axum, Egypt, Jimma, Kuba, Volta and Zande), as well as the African states in an earlier comparative volume (Claessen 1970) — Dahomey and Buganda — were found to be comparable in nearly all respects to the cases from the other continents.

2. African features?

The results of these studies make the existence of "typical African" aspects rather questionable. Do they exist at all? The works of several well-known political anthropologists — for this study limits itself to "political" aspects — give the implicit or explicit impression that traditional African states were something special. However, the fact must not be overlooked that these scholars (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940; Schapera 1956; De Heusch 1958; Vansina 1962; Murdock 1959; Mair 1962, 1977; Balandier 1969) were Africanists, having but limited interest in developments outside of the region of their specialization. The results of the Early State Project, and the more limited analysis of *Van vorsten en volken* (Claessen 1970) demonstrate that in the "general" structural and dynamical aspects there is no reason to expect something really different or exceptional for Africa.

There are, however, parts of the structure of early states in which a certain degree of variation is possible, without affecting the more general structure and the working of the organization as a whole, or the essential character of the sacral ruler. These include variation in the aspects of sacrality, variation in the mode of succession to high office, variation in the position of the royal women, and variation in the tasks of the functionaries in the early state (Claessen 1970: 308 ff.; cf. 1973: 75)². In fact several analyses emphasizing these features have been made in the recent past. Westermann (1952: 34 ff.), as well as Murdock (1959: 37 ff.) presented long lists of traits and aspects, which, in their opinion, were specific to traditional African state. However, in *Van vorsten en volken* (Claessen 1970: 315 ff.) it was found that these lists of so-called specific characteristics could not stand the test of comparison with other regions. Westermann presented 18 traits, of which six were *not* found in at least a number of African states, while 11 were found also in Polynesia or in the realm of the Inca. The only remaining feature was the possibility of a ritual killing of the ruler. The Murdock-list showed the same weaknesses. No less than seventeen out of eighteen aspects were also found outside of Africa. Only one remained as a possibly specifically African aspect, viz. the security provisions around the ruler (which in fact is rather vaguely defined)³. These results seem hardly encouraging.

It seems still possible, however, to find aspects of the traditional African early states, that are characteristic for this region only. Africa will be taken here in the sense of Africa south of the Sahara and in the pre-colonial situation. I exclude those early states where the dominating ideology is definitely non-African, as, for instance, Islamic, or Koptic early states⁴.

In the following section a number of possible specific features will be analysed. This will be done on the base of an extensive survey of the literature on eight early states, with a traditional African culture: Ankole, Rwanda, Buganda, Yoruba (Oyo), Dahomey, Kuba (Bushoong), Tio (Bateke), and Swazi. The choice of this sample is based partly on the consideration that the important regions should be represented, partly on available literature, and partly on the results of earlier research. To this should be added the possibility that the data of the sample are valid only for peoples reached by the so-called "Bantu - expansion" (cf. Kuper & Van Leynseele 1978). The pretension to analyse a balanced, representative sample cannot be but limited, therefore. The results of the investigation will be compared for each case with the findings in

a "control group" made up of the Polynesian early states of Tahiti and Tonga, and the American Incas. Politics, lying on such a distance from Africa, that no connection whatever does exist⁵. In this way it will be possible to formulate — with at least some probability — a list of specific African aspects (cf. the methodological remarks in Claesen & Skalník 1978: 533 ff.).

3. The ethnographical data

The findings of the comparative study suggest that specific aspects will probably be found in only a number of fields such as the sacrality of the ruler, the succession to high office, the position of the royal women and the position of certain functionaries.

3.1. *The sacrality of the ruler*

One of the most debated aspects in this respect is the relationship between the ruler and the fertility of his country. Since Frazer coined the term "divine king" to describe this relationship several anthropologists have considered their findings against this background (for instance Seligman 1934; Mair 1962: 180 ff.; 214 ff.; Richards 1964: 278 ff.; Wilson 1959; Krige 1975). The survey of the literature on the sample of early states led to the following results.

A "direct" relationship between the well-being of the ruler and the fertility of the country was found in the ideology of *Ankole*, *Rwanda*, *Kuba*, *Tio* and *Swazi*. The data for *Buganda* were not clear: several indications could be detected, but a direct relationship could not convincingly be found. *Yoruba* (Oyo) and *Dahomey* scored negatively on this aspect. Here, however, as in *Buganda*, an "indirect" relationship was found to exist: the ruler, being a near relative of the supernatural beings, was supposed to have the power to influence these positively to further well-being of the country. In all cases the ruler performed rituals to promote fertility of land and people.

In connection with these rituals it is interesting to note that in *Ankole*, *Buganda* and *Rwanda* it was explicitly stated that the ruler was *not* a rainmaker, and that in *Kuba*, *Tio* and *Swazi* it was equally emphasized that the ruler was the most important one. *Dahomey* and *Yoruba* provided no data in this respect. Most probably differences in climate — and as a result differences in the annual rainfall — would be responsible for this situation.

In only three cases (*Buganda*, *Dahomey* and *Swazi*) were rituals to restore the physical forces of the ruler mentioned, in *Buganda* and *Dahomey* even accompanied by human sacrifices.

Also in three cases it was stated explicitly that the ruler should avoid any contact with dead, or ill people (*Kuba*, *Tio*, *Swazi*) and for *Buganda* this "taboo" seems probable. For the four other states no data were found in this respect and it seems probable that, at least in *Dahomey*, no prescriptions did exist.

The data mentioned can be presented conveniently in a table. A positive case will be marked with a cross, a negative one with a dash, and where no data were supplied the O-sign will be used. Where the data are unclear or contradictory a question mark be inserted. In the table the data for the control group will also be included.

Table I - Ruler and fertility

Case	Direct	Indirect	Rituals	Rain	Rest. of forces	Avoid death
Ankole	×	—	×	—	○	○
Rwanda	×	—	×	—	○	○
Buganda	?	×	×	—	×	×
Yoruba	—	×	×	○	○	○
Dahomey	—	×	×	○	×	—
Kuba	×	—	×	×	○	×
Tio	×	—	×	×	○	×
Swazi	×	—	×	×	×	×
Tahiti	—	×	×	—	—	—
Tonga	—	×	×	—	—	—
Inca	—	×	×	○	?	—

The results of Table I show that the direct relationship with fertility is found in Africa only — though this aspect is by no means a general characteristic here. Some corroboration for the idea that this is a typical aspect can be found in the distribution of additional aspects such as the restoration of the physical forces of the ruler and the prescription to avoid death and sickness, which appear to be restricted to Africa too.

Directly connected with the relationship between ruler and fertility is the « ritual killing of the king » to quote Westermann's phrase (1952: 34 ff.). It is interesting to note that all works consulted vehemently deny that a king was ever really killed for ritual reasons. The killing existed only in the ideology, in ritual

or in theory. If a ruler was ever killed, it was for political reasons, not for the sake of ritual (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1948). There seems no reason to doubt this information. However, the existence of an ideology in which the ruler could — or should — be killed cannot be denied. This phenomenon was found in *Ankole*, *Rwanda*, *Yoruba*, *Kuba* and in *Buganda*. In *Dahomey* a substitute for the ruler was killed in his place. At least it seems possible to interpret the following phenomena as such: in *Dahomey*, according to Bertho (1946: 62 ff.), the ruler yearly took a ritual bath. Then a boy, clad in the clothes of the ruler was buried alive (no bloodshed), together with the royal hair and nailclippings. This ritual was held at the beginning of the harvest season. In *Buganda* the ruler once during his reign visited the *nankere* priest for the purpose of prolonging his life. The *nankere* then selected one of his own sons, who was then fed and clothed and treated in all respects as a prince. During the ritual the *nankere* presented the boy to the ruler, who passed him on to his body-guard who killed him by beating him with their closed fists, so that no blood was spilled (Roscoe 1911: 210; Claessen 1970: 107). It seems possible to interpret the killing of the bull during the *Swazi incwuala* ceremony also as the killing of a substitute for the ruler (cf. Girard 1972: 150 ff.).

Only for *Tio* were no indications found that killing of the ruler played a role. However, in this polity ceremonies existed for a ritual "rebirth" of the ruler. It seems not unreasonable to expect some connection between this ritual and a more drastic "king-killing-ideology". Moreover, the idea of a rebirth is also found in *Ankole* and *Yoruba*, while the killing of the substitute in *Buganda*, *Dahomey* and *Swazi* also is accompanied by a ritual rebirth of the ruler (cfr. Seligman 1934: 51 ff., 61).

The control group offers not the least indication for king killing or ritual rebirths.

Some other aspects that seem to be connected with the ritual position of African rulers are the existence of (ritual) *incest*, the relationship with a perpetual *fire*, and the fact that the ruler *travels* but seldom, or only within certain limits.

One of the problems connected with incest is that of definition. Generally acceptable seems a definition of incest as the prohibition of sexual intercourse with near kin. The question here is, whether the ruler is allowed or even obliged to trespass this prohibition while his fellowmen are not. Another question is whether the incestuous relation is only incidental, or leads to a relationship

Table II - The killing of the king

Case	Actual killing	Ideological killing	Rebirth
Ankole	—	×	×
Rwanda	—	×	○
Buganda	—	S	×
Yoruba	—	X	×
Dahomey	—	S	×
Kuba	—	×	○
Tio	—	—	×
Swazi	—	×	×
Tahiti	—	—	—
Tonga	—	—	—
Incas	—	—	—

of long duration — even a marriage. In view of this the data of the sample give but one clear example of (ritual) incest: *Kuba*. Here the ruler has sexual intercourse with a full sister, to demonstrate that he, being the ruler, no longer is a member of this family. The *Swazi* ruler can marry women, classified as sisters. Royal incest is not found, and often vehemently denied, in *Ankole*, *Rwanda*, *Yoruba* and *Tio*. In *Dahomey* marriages within the royal clan were permitted, but there is a clear preference for the ruler to marry women outside of the clan. Marriages with sisters are not mentioned at all here. *Buganda* is not clear. The ruler spends a short period with his sister when passing the complex inauguration ritual. This in fact is the custom for all men, who have to pass some ritual. The *lubuga*, the royal (half?) sister, leaves her brother after this short period and from then they live separately. There are no indications that this relationship included sexual intercourse, but there are neither indications that it does not. Some sources speak of a "marriage", others do not (cf. Kagwa 1934, who does not include the *lubuga* in his list of royal spouses).

It is interesting that several authors seem to make royal incest a cornerstone of African kingship, though the ethnographical data are rather poor (De Heusch 1958; Mair 1977: 40, 52.; cf. Beattie 1971). On the other hand, outside of Africa some very clear examples of this custom can be found. Especially the Incas are well-known for marrying full sisters, and the same holds for the highly sacral rulers of the Hawaiian kingdoms. For Tahiti the data are less explicit, but there were no rules against an eventual marrying of close relatives by the rulers. The ruler of the Tonga Islands married a cross-cousin.

Table III - Royal incest, the perpetual fire and limited travels

Case	(Ritual) incest	Marriage of sister	Marriage in clan	Perpet. fire	Limited travel
Ankole	—	—	—	×	×
Rwanda	—	—	—	×	×
Buganda	?	?	×	×	×
Yoruba	—	—	—	○	×
Dahomey	—	—	?	○	×
Kuba	×	?	×	○	×
Tio	—	—	—	×	×
Swazi	—	×	×	○	×
Tahiti	—	—	×	—	—
Tonga	—	—	×	—	—
Incas	—	×	×	—	—

A ritual fire that is extinguished when the ruler dies is mentioned for *Ankole*, *Rwanda*, *Buganda* and *Tio*, generally accompanied by the killing of the keeper of the fire. There were no indications for the existence of such a fire in *Yoruba*, *Dahomey*, *Kuba* and *Swazi*. A perpetual fire was not mentioned for Polynesia or for the Incas. There are no reasons to make this fire a general African characteristic. At best it is typical for the Interlacustrine states.

A better case can be made of the limited freedom for the ruler to travel. For *Ankole*, *Rwanda* and *Buganda* it is stated that the ruler travels only within limited distances, and the same holds for *Dahomey*. The *Yoruba* ruler is even supposed not to leave his palace at all, while for *Kuba* and *Tio* it is stated that the ruler but seldom travels. The *Swazi* ruler does travel, especially at night. This seems possible to be interpreted as a kind of limitation of the freedom to travel. In sharp contrast with this custom are the rulers in other parts of the world. Most of them were hardy travellers, who often and extensively went around⁶.

A discussion of the royal "double" or "twin" will be postponed to 3.4, where also the position of ritual functionaries is brought into the discussion.

3.2. Succession to high office

Is it possible to discern in Africa south of the Sahara special aspects in the « succession to high office » (Goody 1966) or in the « passage of power » (Burling 1974)? The general impression is that at the death of the ruler it is not exactly known which of the

sons of the deceased will become the successor (for instance: Mair 1977: 50, 74, 106, 111 and chapter IX). Somehow the successor is selected from among the sons — usually with the help of a council of high functionaries. This happened in *Buganda*, *Yoruba*, *Tio* and *Swazi*. In *Ankole* and *Rwanda* the ruler suggests a successor, but this is not necessarily the next ruler. In *Ankole* this position usually falls to the prince who succeeded in surviving the fierce wars of succession, and in *Rwanda* the council of high-ranking functionaries could reject the selection, or the brothers of the proposed heir could contest his position. In the case of *Kuba* there seem to be rules, according to which one of the near kin of the ruler — the Bweemy — should succeed. It seems, however, that in practice this but seldom happened. A council of high functionaries had influence upon the actual choice of the successor (cf. Vansina 1964: 113, 119; 1978: 366; cf. Torday & Joyce 1910: 25, 32, 62, 63). Only in *Dahomey* is the future ruler known with at least some certainty, well before the death of the ruler. Also here, however, a selection is made from among the sons of the ruler. The general conclusion therefore can be that the successor, by some mechanism, is chosen from among the sons of the ruler (cf. also Richards 1961; Goody 1966: 12 ff.; 142 ff.).

The question remains whether this is a typical African feature. In view of Goody's remarks (1966: 13) that:

...even in those systems we speak of as hereditary, some element of choice is always present, the extent of option varies greatly from next-in-line succession to "dynastic election". And despite the western idea that the automatic next-of-kin procedure is the normal type, dynastic election is in fact far more wide-spread...

it seems necessary to scrutinize this aspect more closely (cf. also Burling 1974: 25 ff.).

In Tuden and Marshall's *Cross Cultural Codes* (1972: 436 ff.), forty one states are mentioned. Of these forty one cases twelve are found with « a succession in the ruling family (or group of families), the choice among potential heirs being made by the family, the predecessor, a council etc. ». Seven out of twelve were found in Africa. Haiti, with an African cultural heritage, has the same principle of succession. Cases outside of Africa are, according to Tuden and Marshall, the Khmer, the Armenians (in 1843), the Romans A.D. 110, and the Incas. As African cases with a different mode of succession are mentioned: the Bemba, the Fur, the Amhara (1953), Egypt (1950) and Azande. How to square these findings with the rule of dynastic election in Africa? In the first

place it must be pointed out that the procedures for selection among the Bemba or the Azande are hardly different from the procedure known as "dynastic election" (see for the Bemba: Burling 1974: 28 ff.; for Zande: Kandert 1978: 523, 527). They in fact conform to the more general rule. The Islamic Fur and Egyptians, or the Koptic Amhara have a different mode of succession which is connected with the different ideology dominating these polities, an ideology imported at some moment in their history (cf. also Lewis 1978 on Jimma). The discussion so far seems to confirm the idea that dynastic election is predominantly African. But, how about the non-African examples, mentioned by Tuden and Marshall?

It appears that the Khmer are placed correctly under this heading (cfr. Sedov 1978), and the same holds for the Inca. It is not clear, however, why the Romans A.D. 110 are mentioned in this connection, for this was the very period where the emperor "adopted as son" a capable man, to guarantee a qualified successor (Alföldi 1956: 194). As the Armenians in 1823 were incorporated in the Russian empire, it is not clear how they could select successors to their throne in 1843. (In former times, however, the Armenians had the system of dynastic election [Dr. Khazanov, pers. comm.]).

Though the case studies of the Early State volume confirm the impression that dynastic selection was a predominantly African phenomenon (Claessen & Skalník 1978: 116, 173, 302), there are too many exceptions to consider it to be a "typical" African feature.

Table IV - Succession to high office

Case	Dynastic selection	Influence council	Death kept secret	No. phys. defects	Sacral after inaug.
Ankole	×	—	?	×	×
Rwanda	×	×	?	?	×
Buganda	×	×	×	×	×
Yoruba	×	×	?	×	×
Dahomey	×	○	?	×	×
Kuba	×	×	×	○	×
Tio	×	×	×	○	×
Swazi	×	×	×	○	×
Tahiti	—	—	—	—	×
Tonga	—	—	—	—	×
Incas	×	×	×	?	×

In view of the foregoing it is not surprising that there is a tendency to keep the death of the ruler a secret for at least some time. This custom was found in *Buganda*, *Kuba*, *Tio* and *Swazi*, while for *Rwanda* and *Ankole* the data are not clear. It seems improbable, however, that in *Yoruba*, or in *Dahomey* the death of the ruler was kept a secret.

Though in principle several near kin are eligible, there are found some peculiar specifications. In some cases the eldest son of the ruler is excluded from succession: *Buganda*, *Yoruba*, *Kuba* and *Swazi*. In the other cases he had no special position at all (cf. also Richards 1961). There also existed the requirement that the successor should be without physical defects. This is mentioned explicitly for *Ankole*, *Buganda*, *Yoruba* and *Dahomey*, while it seems highly probable for *Rwanda*, where the ruler is expected to be a "strong" man. However, no mention was made of this custom in *Kuba*, *Tio* and *Swazi* — though it is not incompatible with the ideology of these states.

It is interesting to note that in Tahiti and Tonga, where a different mode of succession was found (viz. primogeniture), none of the accompanying features are found either. However, in the realm of the Incas, where dynastic election prevailed, also the other features played a role.

Once the successor is found, a complex ritual is needed to make him, an ordinary mortal, a highly sacral ruler. These rituals were found in all African cases. There is no reason, however, to consider this typically African. In nearly all cases where a sacral ruler is found to exist — and that means in nearly all early states — the same kind of sacralization of the successor is needed. Even in Polynesia, where the crown-prince is already sacral from birth, complex inauguration ceremonies are found, in the course of which he becomes transformed into the sacral ruler.

3.3. *Royal women*

The first person, or rather institution, that comes into view when discussing African royal women, is the "mother" of the ruler. With the exception of *Tio* and *Kuba* she is said to play a most important role in all early states of the sample. However, this in itself is not a peculiar phenomenon. In numerous polities, all over the world, the mother of the ruler has a high status and often influences the politics of the state. It seems, however, that the royal mother in Africa shows some distinct features, the most important of which probably is the institutionalised and "official"

character of her position: not only her status is formally recognized, but if she dies during the reign of her son, a successor is appointed, who in her turn functions as the mother of the ruler.

In *Dahomey* and *Yoruba* even "mothers" of already long deceased rulers are still found. In *Yoruba*, moreover, the real mother of the ruler has to take poison when her son ascends to kingship. She is immediately replaced by an official mother.

The *Tio* form a clear exception. Neither the mother, nor the sister(s) of the ruler have a special position here (Vansina 1973: 393). For *Kuba* the data are but poor. The royal mother is mentioned as being important by Torday and Joyce (1910: 11, 17), while Vansina (1964: 113) mentions her only once. Neither give indications on her position.

In the cases where the mother of the ruler was mentioned as having an important position, it appeared that this position was ritual rather than political. In a recent article Cohen (1977) suggests that the position of the mother of the ruler is a kind of compensation given to the faction of the royal lineage which lost the competition for high office. Though the data of our sample do not seem to support hypothesis in this form, it seems that her position is connected with some security provision: in the patrilineal early states it is her clan that gives the most trustworthy support to the ruler. It also must be pointed out that in these cases it was either the real mother of the ruler, or a near relative of her's who succeeded as the "official mother". In the matrilineal states (*Kuba*, *Tio*) no clear institutionalized and official position of the royal mother could be demonstrated, however.

Table V - Royal women

Case	Royal mother					Royal sister			Inst.
	Instit.	Pol. infl.	Rit. act.	Own mo.	Official	Pol. infl.	Rit. act.	Official	
Ankole	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Rwanda	×	×	×	×	×	—	×	—	—
Buganda	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Yoruba	×	×	×	—	×	—	—	—	—
Dahomey	×	?	×	×	×	—	—	—	—
Kuba	○	○	○	×	○	○	×	○	×
Tio	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Swazi	×	×	×	×	×	×	?	×	×
Tahiti	—	×	—	×	—	—	—	—	—
Tonga	—	×	—	×	—	—	?	—	×
Incas	—	×	—	×	—	—	—	—	—

Incidentally, depending upon her capacities, the mother of the ruler played also a political role. This, however, is hardly limited to Africa. The phenomenon of a politically active royal mother seems to be of all times and all places!

The second "royal woman" who is often mentioned is the (eldest) sister of the ruler. She is, however, mentioned less frequently. In fact she is only found to be of importance in *Ankole*, *Buganda*, *Kuba* and *Swazi*. The four other states of the sample are clearly negative. The royal sister is supposed to fulfil mainly ritual tasks — though this is not clear for *Swazi*. Her position is official in so far that in *Ankole*, *Buganda* and *Swazi* a successor is appointed when she dies. It seems that the royal sister is only found in states where the royal mother also has an institutionalized position.

Only in the Tonga Islands did the sister of the ruler have some sort of a formal status position. However, her position was not official, for there was not appointed a successor, nor had he clear ritual or political tasks (cf. Claessen 1970: 41).

3.4. *Special functionaries*

In the sample of African states functionaries were generally found who acted in specific situations as ritual substitutes for the ruler. The most important of these were connected with the army during the war. The interesting — and typically African — aspect here is not that the ruler is only nominally commander of the army, staying at home, or at least at a safe distance, when actual combat starts. This is a situation quite common, according to the findings of the Early State volume (Claessen & Skalník 1978: 562) — though 19th Century *Dahomey* seems to form an exception in this respect (cf. Claessen 1970: 94). The interesting point is that in all cases a person is found who substitutes the ruler "ritually". It is his ritual blood-brother in the case of the *Swazi*. It is someone who is considered like a king, and who wears the bow-string which is kept by the royal sister in *Kuba*. The *Rwanda*-substitute is considered ritually responsible for the outcome of the battle. He therefore has to sit down without moving during the fight, while the ruler does the same — at home. In *Ankole* the royal fetish and the royal drum are given to the substitute. The *osiwefa* in *Yoruba* wears the royal garments, and exercises royal privileges. The ritual commander of *Tio* is the one who eventually could be king, and in *Dahomey* the ritual commander is allowed to sit on a throne, identical to the royal seat, while he smokes a royal pipe. He is considered explicitly responsible for the outcome

of the war — in the place of the ruler. The ritual commander of *Buganda* is considered as "king". He therefore is not allowed to sleep in the royal residence (no two kings on one hill), gets the ashes of the royal fire on his face, and wears royal paraphernalia.

There are not the slightest indications that a comparable functionary is found outside of Africa.

Table VI - Special functionaries

Case	Ritual commander	Other substitutes	Ritual obligations regional administr.
Ankole	×	×	—
Rwanda	×	×	—
Buganda	×	×	—
Yoruba	×	×	—
Dahomey	×	×	—
Kuba	×	×	—
Tio	×	×	—
Swazi	×	○	○
Tahiti	—	—	×
Tonga	—	—	×
Incas	—	—	×

Not only in the military aspect are ritual substitutes found. Also in other respects people fulfil ritual activities in the place of the ruler. In *Kuba* the *Bangwaam incyaam* fulfil rituals in connection with the moon-when the ruler is surrounded by strong taboos. Their position as substitutes perhaps can be inferred best from their burial rituals which are as those of the ruler.

In *Rwanda* there are "ritual kings", having their own capitals and drums. They guard the most important rituals which have as a purpose the well-being of the ruler and the country. In *Ankole* some ritualists make rain in the place of the ruler, and in *Yoruba* the *osiwefa* fulfils several ritual tasks in the place of the ruler. Also there are people here who, for him, take part in religious or social rituals.

The ruler of *Tio* has to undergo the long and complex inauguration ritual in company of a child, who had to sit on the royal seat several times in his place. In *Dahomey* is found a priest who is tattooed in the face with the cicatrices of the royal panther (the ruler's blood is not allowed to be spilled). In *Buganda* functionaries such as the *kauzumu* and the *kango* fulfil mourning taboos in the place of the ruler. For *Swazi* there are no clear data —

with the exception of the bloodbrothers of the ruler. They will be discussed in the next section.

Again, there are no indications that this type of functionaries was found outside of Africa.

The most interesting substitute is perhaps the royal "twin" or, rather, "double". This is sometimes an object, and sometimes a person. In some cases the double exists for a short time only, and in others it may survive the ruler. In short, there is much variation, but the underlying idea seems to be the same everywhere: to have a ritual substitute for the ruler. In fact the ritual commander, discussed above, also belongs to this category.

A well-known example is the royal drum in *Ankole*. This drum symbolizes more than the ruler himself, the principle of royalty. There are even human sacrifices in honor of this drum. Besides this, there is also a person, who acts, during the interregnum as a mock-king, and who is killed as soon as the new ruler makes his entry. Also *Rwanda* has a royal drum, having the same symbolic value as the drum in *Ankole* (cf. Muller 1976).

In *Buganda* the position of the drum is of lesser importance. Here the royal "double" is the carefully preserved umbilical cord of the ruler. In the person of the *kauta* the ruler has, moreover, a blood-brother, who is killed when the ruler dies.

The *Yoruba* are less clear in this respect, though here is found the *aremo*, the eldest son of the ruler, who reigns together with his father, but has to die with his father also. Another possible double is the *osiwefa*, who was mentioned already as ritual commander. The ruler of *Dahomey* finds a ritual double in the "bush-king" — as this object is usually called by the ethnographers. All rituals are done twice here: once for the ruler, and once for the bush-king.

The ruler of *Kuba* has a carved image, the *ndop*, which was supposed to be his double. When the ruler died, the carver of the *ndop* was killed. It is not clear if the "great fetish" of *Tio* can be considered also as a double. In the case of the *Swazi* the two *tinsila*, the blood-brothers of the ruler, must be mentioned here. They have a close ritual connection with the ruler, and several times act as his substitutes. In former times it seems that they were not to survive the ruler.

When discussing functionaries with ritual responsibilities, it is interesting to note that Africa seems to be an exception in that regional administrative functionaries had *no* ritual obligations as such — *Swazi* in this respect being not clear. Ritual obligations, however, were found to be a normal part of the tasks performed

Table VII - Royal doubles

Case	Object	Blood-br.	Other person	Killing of double	Ritual commander
Ankole	drum	—	mock-king	×	×
Rwanda	drum	—	—	—	×
Buganda	umb. cord	kauta	—	×	×
Yoruba	—	—	osiwefa aremo	×	×
Dahomey	bush-king	—	—	—	×
Kuba	ndop	—	—	×	×
Tio	fetish	?	child at inaugur.	—	×
Swazi	—	tinsila	—	×	×
Tahiti	—	—	—	—	—
Tonga	—	—	—	—	—
Incas	—	—	—	—	—

by the regional functionaries in Tahiti and Tonga, as well as in the realm of the Incas (cf. Table VI).

4. Discussion of the findings

At the outset it should be made clear that the data presented are not based upon an exhaustive review of all possible literature. In some cases only some general works were consulted, and in other cases relevant literature was not available. It is very well possible that more thorough research would have provided more and better data. The following discussion therefore of necessity must have the character of hypotheses and possibilities, and not of unshakable conclusions and truths.

The tables make clear that not all aspect discussed were found in precolonial Africa south of the Sahara only, while others, though restricted to Africa, were not found to be general here. It may be helpful therefore to take into consideration also aspects that can be considered as functional equivalents, and aspects that — though not having a general distribution — seem to corroborate the more central ones.

The direct relation between the health of the ruler and the well-being of the country (the traditional concept of "divine king") according to the data presented seems to be found in Africa only, though not everywhere (Table I). *Dahomey* and *Yoruba* do not

recognize this relationship, while the case of *Buganda* is not clear. It appears, however, that both in *Buganda* and *Dahomey* rituals exist which aim at the ritual physical enforcement of the ruler, while in *Buganda* moreover the ruler is not allowed to come into contact with death or sickness.

The above must not be seen separate from Table II, however. The ritual killing of the ruler was found to be characteristic for Africa. It also is connected with the relation between ruler and fertility. The killing, or rather the "ritual" killing of the ruler, was not found to be practised generally. *Dahomey Swazi* and *Buganda* knew only the killing of a substitute, while *Tio* had no killing at all. However, a ritual rebirth of the ruler was known here too. In view of these data it seems probable that the ideology of the relationship between the ruler and fertility, as well as the "killing of the king" are typical African features, even though not all components of this complex were found to exist everywhere.

As Table III shows, there is no reason to think of royal incest as a general characteristic of African early states. Neither the relations between the ruler and his mother, nor those between him and his sister can be considered as such. Only in *Kuba* a ritual incest between the ruler and his sister occurred, but apparently with the intention to demonstrate that he no longer was a member of his family. The data for *Buganda* were not clear. Moreover, royal incest was found to exist outside of Africa as well.

An interesting feature is the limited freedom of the ruler to travel. This was found to be characteristic for Africa only. If this aspect is brought into connection with the ruler's influence upon fertility, it may be interpreted as a means to keep him in the very heart of his country, or to prevent him spreading his benign powers elsewhere.

On the ritual fire the data are too poor to make possible any generalization.

The succession to high office in Africa was found to be generally by means of dynastic election. However, it also appeared that this method of finding a successor to a deceased ruler was found in some states outside of Africa too (Khmer, Incas, Aztecs). The method of dynastic election has some inevitable consequences, such as the influence of councils, a period of interregnum, sometimes leading even to civil war, the necessity of extended rituals to make the successor a sacral ruler, the effort to keep the death of the ruler a secret, etc. This complex of consequences was found to exist also outside of Africa. It is not unimportant perhaps, that the dynastic

election was found in Africa generally, but outside of Africa only by way of exception. It seems possible, therefore, to call this method typically African.

The prescription that a successor to high office must be without physical defects is quite in line with the assumed relationship between the ruler's health and the fertility of the country. This requirement was found only in Africa — as far as the literature available showed. Interesting in this respect is that *Yoruba*, *Dahomey* and *Buganda* know this prescription explicitly, while here the relationship between ruler and fertility is more indirect than direct. This seems to corroborate the idea that the direct relationship is a general African phenomenon.

The position of the royal women, the mother and the sister of the ruler, is a rather complex one. Their position is *not* accidental, but institutionalized. With the exception of *Kuba* and *Tio* (where spouses of the ruler fulfilled these tasks) it is everywhere stated that the ruler cannot rule without a mother: his own mother to start with, and an "official" mother when she dies. The reasons behind such a double monarchy are not too clear, and neither are the actual activities of the mother. She is said to have political influence, or to fulfil ritual tasks, but none of these seem to justify such a lofty position. Perhaps a hard core of "realpolitik" is hidden behind the mythical and ritual statements that are often given to explain her status: the support of mother's patrician. This support is not without importance for a new ruler, not specially educated to be king, starting his new career while a number of potential usurpers are eagerly awaiting their chance to supplant him. It is not without meaning that often the mother of the ruler liquidates dangerous brothers of the ruler (as has been well attested for *Buganda*, for instance). Even where in a fierce war of succession the competing princes have been eliminated the support of a powerful faction is not to be despised by the ruler (cf. also Cohen 1977). The position of the royal mother seems to give this support a formal status. In view of the "balance of power" policy, which is found to exist in all early states (cf. Claessen 1979), this explanation seems not improbable. A corroboration of this view may be found in the fact that the successor of the royal mother generally is recruited from her near kin.

The same considerations may play a role in the explanation of the position of the royal sister. She is less frequently found in an institutionalized position than the royal mother, but when this position is recognized her position is quite comparable: she has

same political and ritual tasks, and when she dies a successor is appointed. In view of the "balance of Power" policy she may be a kind of counterweight against the royal harem.

The phenomenon of the institutionalized position of a royal mother, as well as a royal sister, seems to be specifically African.

The ritual commander, who was found in Africa only, can easily be related to the rulers's influence upon fertility. The ruler should avoid not only the risks of the battlefield, but also the ritual responsibility for war and bloodshed. Therefore a substitute is chosen, who, dressed in royal garments, and with royal paraphernalia in hand, accompanies the army. He, and not the ruler, carries the ritual responsibility (cf. Claessen 1970: 264). This seems to be found in Africa only. The same holds for the other ritual substitutes. They, however, seem not to be connected with a dangerous responsibility, but rather with the simple fact that physically the ruler cannot meet all the demands made upon his time by both ritual and administrative responsibilities. Especially since ritual obligations often lay a heavy claim on time and attention, he has to find a kind of solution for this. The burden of these obligations is felt in early states outside of Africa too. Here solutions are often sought in other direction: the sacral ruler of Tahiti, for instance, abdicates as soon as a son is born to him. This infant son now becomes king, burdened with all sacral obligations, while the father continues his reign, without ritual problems, as the regent for his son. The ruler in the Tonga Islands followed another policy. He appointed a hereditary political "substitute" and kept for himself the ritual position. Elsewhere (Incas) a high priest, a near relative of the ruler, took over nearly all ritual obligations (cf. Claessen 1970: 222 ff.).

Interesting in this respect is that the regional administrative functionaries in Africa had no ritual obligations at all (apart from private obligations as lineage head etc.).

The last aspect to be considered is that of the royal "doubles". It seems that this custom is found in Africa only. There is wide variation in this aspect: from drum to blood-brother. The meaning of the custom is not too clear. Perhaps it should be interpreted as a way to symbolize the royal omnipresence. Perhaps a kind of ritual selfprotection lies at the bottom of the custom. In some cases the "double" lives on after the death of the ruler, and in other cases people like the blood-brothers, or the carver of the *ndop*, have to die when the ruler dies.

5. Conclusions

Summarizing the results of the discussion it can be said that there are found a number of features that seem to be typical for precolonial Africa south of the Sahara. These features were *not* found in the control group, and neither in the data of the Early State sample.

1. A direct relationship between the health of the ruler and the wellbeing, or fertility, of the country.
2. A ritual "killing" of the ruler when his virility diminishes.
3. A limited freedom to travel for the ruler.
4. The existence of a royal "double".
5. The demand that a heir-successor should be without physical defects.
6. The institution of a co-ruling, officially royal mother.
7. A "ritual commander", who carries the ritual responsibility for military activities.
8. Some high-ranking functionaries who fulfil, as substitutes, certain ritual obligations for the ruler.
9. No ritual responsibilities for regional administrative functionaries.

With some hesitation may be added to this list:

10. the institution of an official royal sister.

It is possible to interpret the features mentioned above as the specific expressions of but a few underlying principles: the alleged direct relationship between the ruler's health and the fertility of the country is connected with the "killing" of the ruler, his limited freedom to travel, the physical fitness of the successor, and the avoidance of military activities, coming to the fore in the position of the ritual commander.

The often hard-won position of the ruler — via the royal election — seems to call forth the position of the royal mother and the royal sister, expressing the support of mother's patri-clan. It seems to be connected also with the non-ritual position of the regional administrators. It is also possible to interpret the position of the ruler in terms of a kinship system, being a clan- or lineage chief, rather than a warrior king, or a priest-king. In this respect can be mentioned the great influence of the (official) royal relatives, as mother and sister, but also the position of the (eldest) son, and the competition with his brothers.

The combination of administrative and ritual obligations may have led to the development of the royal doubles, the ritual functionaries and the ritual commander — as well as, perhaps, to a number of ritual tasks, fulfilled by the royal mother and sister.

In view of these conclusions it seems apparent that in the African early states the complex relationship between power, power-base and ideology found specific forms of expression: a clan-oriented type of kingship, and fertility as the dominant characteristic of the ideology. This clearly indicates the existence of an underlying pattern: the features not being just a collection of not-connected traits (cf. Kuper & Van Leynseele 1978: 350).

The data of the control group suggest that these characteristics were either not found at all outside of Africa, or developed in a rather different way.

The question concerning origin and development of these specific African features — tempting though it may be — will however not be discussed in this paper⁷.

Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge the constructive and stylistic criticism by my colleagues: Martin van Bakel, Renée Hagesteijn, Adam Kuper, Jean-Claude Muller, Jarich Oosten, Michal Tymowski and Pieter van de Velde, who read and commented upon an earlier version of this paper.

2. This point of view approaches in some respects Steward's (1955: 184; cf. Claessen 1973: 75 ff.) views. For this author says on the basis of what he discovered in a comparative study of the rise of the state in Mesopotamia and Meso-America that by isolating the important institutions from their specific appearances and by abstracting them into types one is then able to use the terms "basic" and "constant". The phenomena giving these institutions their specific form can be qualified as "secondary", or "variable".

3. This conclusion in *Van vorsten en Volken* must be corrected, however, in view of later research. The security provisions, as suggested by Murdock, are only a consequence of the system of "dynastic elections", which are — as this article will demonstrate — not an exclusive African custom.

The position of the royal mother, also mentioned in his list, is in fact the only typical African aspect — though in a more limited formulation. The wide formulation Murdock used led to the incorrect conclusion in *Van vorsten en volken*. The same holds for Westermann (1952: 39), who defined mother's position also far too wide.

4. This is not to say, of course, that in these states typical African features should not exist at all. However, as most sources on these states are Arabic, or Coptic, the typical African features became more or less obscured.

5. The following sources have been consulted for the case studies:

- Ankole*: Oberg 1940; Roscoe 1923; Karugire 1971; Doornbos 1973, 1975; Steinhart 1978.
Rwanda: Maquet 1954, 1961; d'Hertefelt 1962, 1965, 1971; d'Hertefelt and Coupez 1964.
Buganda: Based on chapter IV of Claessen 1970, which covers most of the relevant ethnographical literature.
Yoruba: Johnson 1921; Lloyd 1960, 1967, 1968; Smith 1969; Kochakova 1978.
Dahomey: Based upon chapter III of Claessen 1970.
Kuba: Torday and Joyce 1910; Vansina 1964, 1978.
Tio: Guiral 1889; Brunschwig 1965; Obenga 1969; Vansina 1973.
Swazi: Marwick 1940; (H.) Kuper 1947, 1952, 1964; (A.) Kuper 1978.

For the control group are used:

- Tahiti*: Claessen 1970, 1978; Oliver 1974.
Tonga: Claessen 1970; Rutherford 1977.
Incas: Claessen 1970; Schaedel 1978.

6. The Early State sample shows the following (Claessen & Skalník 1978: 585):

no travelling at all.: Yoruba;
 limited travelling only: Ankole, Aztecs, Jimma, Kuba;
 extensive travelling: Angkor, Axum, China, Egypt, France, Hawaii, Incas, Maurya, Mongolia, Norway, Scythia, Tahiti.

Volta appeared to have changed from extensive travelling to limited in the course of its history.

7. Readers interested in these questions can be referred to Tor Irstam, *The King of Ganda: Studies in the Institutions of Sacral Kingship in Africa*, 1944. Stockholm: Statens Etnografiska Museum. [Editor's note]

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Summary

This article investigates whether African early states (south of the Sahara) show organizational features that can be labeled typically, or specifically African. To reach this goal first the concept of the early state is presented. Then the problem of "specific features" is dealt with. It is suggested that specific features are found mainly in those parts of the structure, in which a certain degree of variation is possible, without affecting the more general structure of the early state. These include variation in the aspects of sacrality, variation in the mode of succession, variation in the position of royal women etc.

Ethnographic data on eight African early states (Ankole, Rwanda, Buganda, Yoruba, Dahomey, Kuba, Tio, and Swazi) are presented and compared in order to find common features. The African data are compared in each case with the findings in a control group made up of the Polynesian early states Tahiti and Tonga, and the realm of the Incas.

In the end a number of specific African features are suggested — with the possibility that the data are valid only for peoples reached by the so-called Bantu expansion.

Sommario

Il presente articolo si propone di prendere in esame le forme arcaiche di stato africano, localizzate a sud del Sahara, per comprendere se le caratteristiche organizzative possano essere considerate tipicamente o specificamente africane. A tale scopo viene innanzitutto presentato il concetto di stato arcaico, cui segue la trattazione del problema delle "caratteristiche specifiche". L'A. ritiene che queste ultime siano individuabili essenzialmente in quelle parti della struttura in cui è possibile un certo grado di variabilità, senza che sia intaccata la struttura generale dello stato arcaico. Si possono dunque avere variazioni negli aspetti della sacralità, nel modo della successione, nella posizione delle donne di sangue reale ecc.

I dati etnografici relativi a otto stati arcaici africani (Ankole, Rwanda, Buganda, Yoruba, Dahomey, Kuba, Tio, Swazi), vengono esaminati e paragonati per documentarne le caratteristiche comuni; in ciascun caso inoltre i dati africani vengono comparati con quelli di un gruppo di controllo costituito dagli stati arcaici polinesiani di Tahiti e Tonga e dal regno degli Inca.

Nella conclusione l'A. riporta alcune caratteristiche specificamente africane, suggerendo la possibilità che i dati siano validi solo per le popolazioni raggiunte dalla cosiddetta espansione bantu.