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Urban citizenship in Africa South of the Sahara

Comments on Maarten Prak's Citizens without Nations

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Abstract

This article argues that the defining features of urban citizenship as described by Maarten Prak for Europe, Asia and the Americas, were also present in the cities that emerged in Africa south of the Sahara well before the colonial era. It discusses the forms that citizenship in Africa took, paying special attention to the question whom were qualified as citizens.

If we accept the definition in which Maarten Prak opposes 'urban citizenship' to national citizenship, and if we agree that citizenship, broadly speaking, implies urban autonomy and is nothing but a set of practices conducive to governing the urban community, I see no reason why this definition, which I support, would not apply to all societies in the world since they were first organized. This holds true for the African societies, as well as for the Asian societies examined in this work. The general introduction, which is extensive and specific, might very well relate to the countries in sub-Saharan Africa that I know best, for the *same* time frame, admittedly requiring some adjustments, due to different histories and contexts. No more than in premodern Western societies did we encounter the model of national citizenship as defined nowadays, as the author notes, by political power, universal suffrage and the principle of individual freedom.

Urbanization: Global process, African process

Maarten Prak is right: in Africa, like elsewhere, the origin of citizenship lies in urbanization. Contrary to conventional beliefs, the cities there,

as in all societies, have always been driving forces in politics, economy, religion and military developments. The key is to agree on the definition of what a city is: the city reflects its surroundings and the economic, political and military way of life of that society, at any era whatsoever. Paul Bairoch has already demonstrated that in Africa, like elsewhere, political organization started with the emergence of cities, and that these cities developed very early, with the adoption of agriculture, or in other words, at the dawn of history.[1] In Africa, like elsewhere, the food surpluses thus enabled the autonomy of the privileged, who no longer needed to dedicate their efforts to subsistence for the sake of survival. Huge demographic growth ensued, as the agricultural transition made possible a tenfold increase in human density on the same surface. This raised the need for economic and social organization by new actors: political and religious leaders aided by a great many semi-independent assistants and supplied from the surrounding countryside, and groups of professionals organized and authorized to this effect. The city was the site of all power, which was wielded everywhere throughout what is known as precolonial history.[2] The power exercised by the cities took many forms and is visible even in what the ethnologists of the past labelled 'stateless societies', which undoubtedly existed only in the era of the hunter-gatherers (if they existed at all). Jan Vansina has masterfully demonstrated that past societies in the Congolese basin, reputed to be 'un-organized', were on the contrary well organized and were even relatively democratic (despite the inappropriateness of the term), as the presumed chief was continuously monitored by his people.[3]

Another example concerns the city-states, which were contemporaneous to their Hanseatic or Italian equivalents, and were focused on the same priorities: interregional, perhaps international trade, across vast distances, in valuable merchandise (including gold and slaves). All things being equal, the development of 'citizenship' also took place in these areas, be it in the Hausa urban settlements in the North of Nigeria (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century), in the Yoruba cities in the south, which existed until the colonization, or in the cluster of cities in the hinterlands of the Gold Coast between the sixteenth and seven-

1 P. Bairoch, *Villes et économie dans l'histoire. De Jéricho à Mexico* (Paris 1985). Translated as: *Cities and economic development. From the dawn of history to the present* (Chicago 1988).

2 C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *A history of African cities from the origins to colonization* (Princeton 2005) (French ed. 1993); D. Anderson and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Africa's urban past* (London 2000).

3 J. Vansina, *Paths in the rainforest. Toward a history of political tradition in equatorian Africa* (London 1990).

Illustration 1 Jacob van Meurs, 'Bird's eye view of Loango'. Loango was a precolonial state in what is now the western part of Congo, the south of Gabon and the north of Angola (source: Wikimedia Commons. Original: Olfert Dapper, 'Naukeurige beschrijvingen der Afrikaensche gewesten' (1668), Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, inv. no. 185 B 11 part I, after 518).

teenth centuries.[4] The inhabitants, who were interconnected by culture, language and shared interests, all belonged to the city, even if they lived in the surrounding countryside. Their history, among so many others, has been written and is well-known to specialists.

This is why I find it unfortunate that the author has not tried to confront his arguments with the history of Africa south of the Sahara, which, for the past forty years, has generated a fascinating output in various languages in this respect. A correct understanding of African societies is necessary. On the one hand, Africa (and Africa south of the Sahara, on which I am a specialist) is a vast continent, where climate, environment, ways of life (pastoral or sedentary) and economic and political systems have varied as much as anywhere throughout history, if not more. On the other hand, periodization is important: there is a before, a during and an after the two dominant modes of relations that ultimately gave the different societies a common substrate. First came the intensive phase of international slave trade, which began in the seventh

4 R.A. Kea, *Settlements, trade, and polities in the seventeenth-century Gold Coast* (Baltimore 1982).

century in the Arab-Muslim world, both south of the Sahara and on the east coast, and continued on the Atlantic coast from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, so pervasively that most of the continent was involved. This was followed by the European colonial era, initiated from the sixteenth century onwards by Portugal in Angola, which affected virtually the entire continent after the onset, in the late eighteenth century, of demand for industrial raw materials by the Western economy.

Multiple contacts, via the Sahara, the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, brought about numerous outside influences and various forms of creolization. For instance, the ruler of the kingdom of the Kongo and his entourage converted to Christianity already in 1497. From this period, multi-directional exchanges took place between Africa, Europe and the Americas. Within a distinctive social category, comprising aristocrats and their alleged functionaries, international and local merchants, priests and seafarers, increasingly strong relationships were created. The colonial influence, which, simultaneously with the conquest, gave rise to the first signs of a 'modern' citizenship, will be disregarded here. This form of citizenship was progressively assimilated throughout the colonization period, accelerating when countries became independent; a subject that has been already explored extensively in recent years.[5]

Quite some time has passed since the Europeans considered African peoples and societies, known as 'precolonial' at the time, to be 'ill-clad savages'. They were labelled by contemporary ethnologists as 'lawless', because they were 'stateless' (which nowadays is subject to debate), i.e. lacking political organization worthy of being qualified as such. Research initially addressed the transition period from these ancient societies to the westernized societies which, in some cases, started to emerge already in the sixteenth century (I reject the term 'traditional', which is meaningless in a millennial history about which specialists nowadays know that it was as eventful and varied as on other continents). In this research focusing on the transition from the status of 'subject' as codified by the colonial power, without any rights at all except to obey, to that of 'citizen', what happened before appears to have lapsed into oblivion. The political organizations of the past were, however, independent systems of organized people who, strictly speaking, were 'occupied' by a dictatorial white power that instigated a harsh political rupture.

5 For example: F. Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës en Afrique centrale. Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, 1940-1965* (Paris 1996); F. Cooper, *Citizenship between empire and nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton 2014).

This is why I regret that the author seems to suggest that the matter did not come into play in Africa in the past. He is, however, not an exception in this respect; in general, there is an astonishingly widespread ignorance about the inheritance of slavery and colonization that obscures the reality of African history in the West. The process leading to 'modern citizenship' was initiated one century prior to independence and happened in stages, starting when the colonial power granted citizenship to locals, albeit in very limited measure. After the First World War, the French government extended its citizenship to 500,000 former soldiers from all over the Empire, who had been conscripted to fight under the French flag. Finally, from 1945 onwards, by relaxing the system of the *indigénat*, the 'imperial citizenship' was created. In many respects this resembled the progression of the citizenship introduced in France, with the French Revolution marking its transition from the *Ancien Regime* to the *Nouveau Regime*; this has been studied in depth for English- and French-speaking societies in Africa for about 30 years.[6]

Types of urban citizenship, in Africa as elsewhere

The different types of urban citizenship preferred before the years of colonial conquest may be examined. They were many and varied, as they were elsewhere: large, isolated market towns, city-states, confederations, chieftaincies, kingdoms, empires; all existed and were regulated in a fairly well-known manner, according to past studies,[7] as well as those recently undertaken.[8] Frankly, I focus a bit too much on my speciality and not enough on the work that nonetheless has the great merit of opening the horizon on non-European societies. Maarten Prak engages in the practice that a researcher such as Marcel Détienne rightly describes as the boldness of a historian in 'comparing the incomparable'.[9] I wish to comment on how right he is, and on how what Prak suggests merits elaboration.

6 M. Mamdani, *Citizen and subject. Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (Princeton 1996); C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Nationalité et citoyenneté en Afrique occidentale française. Originaires et citoyens dans le Sénégal colonial', *Journal of African History* 42 (2001) 285-305; Cooper, *Citizenship between empire and nation*.

7 Cf. note 2.

8 L. Fourchard, 'African urban history. Past and present perspective', *Lagos Historical Review* 5 (2015) 1-21.

9 M. Détienne, *Comparer l'incomparable* (Paris 2000).

Africanist anthropologists have emphasized the importance of ties within clans or lineage. Their role was essential, especially for the welfare of clan members. In political, economic and urban respects, however, the collective is not, barring exceptions, merely 'a' lineage but involves a necessarily organized and regulated coexistence of several lineage segments, in a usually very inegalitarian society because of the status of its members, both within the lineage and outside: the chief and his close entourage, freemen, slaves, the 'caste' of manual workers inferior to freemen but above slaves, dependents according to one or another title. Regulation took place in part within the councils (of the village, of the chieftains, of the city): absolutism of the sovereign was rare. This was not only because rules of succession varied: within aristocratic families, the council was responsible for deciding who was best, and deliberations could take a long time, sometimes lasting several years after the funeral of the deceased chief (as in the Kingdom of Dahomey, for example). Besides, the scope of the central government was limited by distance and by communication difficulties. As travel on foot did not allow the government to reach very far, power tended to be delegated to a vast series of intermediaries, whose autonomy could be quite large.

Who were the 'citizens' who had a say in the matter? This could vary immensely; what role did the women have? They were entirely responsible for provisioning in these societies, where this was essential. Not only did they produce, but they also ran the town markets (especially in West Africa), where they organized the sale and distribution of supplies, which they sometimes brought from very far away via organized networks. At the start of colonization, in Yoruba country (Nigeria) in the 1920s or in Lomé (Togo) in 1933, women were the first to stage riots against rulers that wanted to impose trade licensing for the markets. These women made their rights prevail.

Could anybody claim to be a citizen? Certainly not. In any case, neither slaves (most obviously) nor outsiders could. The notion of being an outsider with respect to the community has always been very pronounced. To gain acceptance among the local population, any outsider had to request the consent of the '*chef de terre*', who was a sort of sacred custodian of the property of the group as a whole. To this day, the repeated clashes between 'outsiders' and 'citizens' attest to the obvious difference between the rights of the former and the latter; the difficulties experienced in Côte d'Ivoire by the Mossi immigrants from the North (Upper Volta, which has become Burkina Faso), even if they had settled there several generations ago, are a classic example.

Basically, it would be worthwhile to elaborate on the idea of urban 'citizenship' from below in Africa, which is often overlooked by researchers of traditional societies, who are more interested in studying the politics of local states and exploring how those in control exercised their power, from the 'chieftains' to the 'sultanate', than in the process of what Maarten Prak calls urban citizenship, which arose early in certain cases (Hausa city-states from the sixteenth century, for example).

Clearly, the concept of citizenship in ancient African societies had little to do with the legal definition that figures nowadays in contemporary societies, set forth in a written constitution (as in France) or in case law (as in Great Britain). This does not mean that individuals, generally men, although women were not necessarily excluded, had no say at all in the political and social organization of the city or state. Those men and women could be regarded as equivalent to citizens, who were recognized as qualified to run the community and could be consulted on decisions to be taken. Basically, they were regarded as persons capable of participating in the politics of this group, possibly at various levels and in differentiated capacities. This was the case in all political societies, whatever their form may have been.

Let us consider the extreme case of societies regarded as 'stateless', based on links that were essentially lineages, in the relatively confined context of a village or a group of villages. In the past, some ethnologists imagined them as relatively egalitarian 'village communities', living in a primitive type of communism, where households achieved a mutual equilibrium. Since the 1970s, anthropologists and sociologists such as Claude Meillassoux,[10] as well as Benedict Anderson,[11] have demonstrated how inaccurate this view was, especially because a village rarely comprised only one 'lineage' but encompassed several segments of different coexisting lineages. Even within the same residential family – in the wide sense of the term, i.e. containing three or more generations within the same space, each comprising parents, children, cousins, dependents, wives and slaves – the inequalities were significant, and the hierarchy of authorities was well defined. Admittedly, the elders dominated, but all decisions concerning the group as a whole had to be taken by consensus. This consensus presumed unanimous agreement, generally reached after discussions that could last very long (known as a *palabre*). This is basically the opposite of the democratic electoral princi-

10 C. Meillassoux, 'Essai d'interprétation du phénomène économique dans les sociétés traditionnelles d'auto-subsistance', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 1:4 (1960) 38-67.

11 B. Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London 1983).

ple, where the minority, duly recognized and accepted, agrees to defer to the majority. The objective, by contrast, was for everybody to end up agreeing collectively to the final decision.

The main question is: who was 'everybody'? Basically, who were those who might qualify as 'citizens' in the manner of the ancient Greeks of Athens; in fact a minority, once the metis, slaves, women and outsiders were excluded? In African societies a whole range of different formulas existed, depending on the political environment. Seniority was one possible case, the age category becoming the essential criterion for participating in the discussion. But then an equally frequent case was that of the caste societies, where the political power was in the hands of given castes: clearly a superior caste but not necessarily a royal caste, as the subject of debates was often the election of a new chief. The new chief had to be recognized as the best (the most deserving, the most courageous, the wealthiest, the wisest), admittedly belonging to a caste authorized to exercise power, but certainly not necessarily as a hereditary right. Succession might continue to be debated for months, even several years, without necessarily having to be settled through armed force. At all levels, therefore, a group of those in charge had to decide who had the right to take office and why, and which criteria had to be applied. In this process, some were entitled to participate in the debates – they would be qualified as citizens – and some were not, as they were excluded by status: in general women, those who were younger, members of the castes of manual workers, slaves and outsiders.

In other words, barring exceptions, this means that dictatorship, the absolute power wielded by a single potentate excluding all others, thereby prohibiting any equivalence of citizenship, was the exception rather than the rule in pre-colonial African societies. There were several reasons: first, the requirement of consensus, but from the moment political space expanded also the technical conditions. Henceforth, power was delegated and hierarchized, and the organization became progressively vertical, with a hierarchy of intermediate powers, either still based on lineages or purely administrative. Basically, political organization presumed a hierarchy of responsibilities on the part of those more or less recognized as 'citizens', i.e. acknowledged by the group as legitimate representatives. One of the best-studied examples of this very common style of 'monarchy' was the kingdom of Buganda in present-day Uganda (sixteenth-nineteenth century).[12] This kind of

12 H. Médard, *Le Royaume du Buganda au xixe siècle. Mutations politiques et religieuses d'un ancien État d'Afrique de l'Est* (Paris 2007).

arrangement was commonplace: e.g. in Oyo or Benin City (now Nigeria) from the twelfth century onwards, in the Kingdom of Abomey or that of the Ashanti from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, etc. Monographs abound, describing the politically complex operation of these systems.

In addition to these political systems, there were all those that, in one form or another, were influenced by external systems. The two major influencers that emerged were the Arab Muslims from the tenth century in West Africa and along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, and the Europeans on the Atlantic coast; starting with the Portuguese, who introduced western notions of power from the beginning of the fifteenth century. The best-known example is that of the Kingdom of the Kongo, where King Afonso converted to Christianity in 1497, and where the institutions were based on Portuguese political practices throughout the sixteenth century.

Political Islam surfaced several centuries before this. The king of Ghana converted in the eleventh century and in his government made use of scribes writing in Arabic. Unfortunately, hardly anything else is known about his style of government. More is known about the Empire of Mali (fourteenth-fifteenth century) of which the founder, or more likely the successor of the founder, Soundiata Keita (1190-1255) is believed to have promulgated or to have had promulgated the rules of the kingdom, preserved and transmitted since then by the traditionists. Unfortunately, they were not transcribed until a meeting of these traditionists in Bamako in 1998. The text that resulted, the charter of Manden, or of Kouroukan Fouga, or, in Malinke, *Manden Kalikan*, is said to have been solemnly proclaimed in 1236. There are three versions, conveyed in ten articles, which appear too 'modern' to be taken literally, even though UNESCO registered it in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2009. Nowadays, the text is regarded by those speaking Mandé as one of the oldest references concerning the basic rights, perhaps the precursor of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. Even without going that far, this heritage nevertheless conveys the existence of a state with a vast area, ruled by a set of recognized laws and customs that were consequently applicable by agents of the state. The text clearly distinguishes citizens of Mali (or their equivalent) from outsiders, if only because the charter prohibits enslaving nationals.

From the fifteenth century, the influence of the Portuguese monarchy was evident in Kongo, where the aristocrats in charge of the king-

dom were henceforth referred to in terms deriving from the Portuguese court. The legal presence of the Portuguese who settled in Angola from the end of the sixteenth century can be felt from that point onwards; various studies based on texts from the era clearly reveal the distinct roles of the members of the aristocracy and the different social categories involved in a complex economic and social organization, where Portuguese had become the language used for communication, and where merchants, mestizos or *pombeiros* and, at the very bottom of the scale, slaves coexisted in different roles and responsibilities. A detailed study of this society has recently been completed by a Franco-Portuguese researcher.[13] Clearly, Kongolese 'nationality' existed, and elements of citizenship are discernible there. I am pleased to quote a passage from the innovative work by Catarina Madeira Santos on the matter, as it was raised in Luanda in the sixteenth century:

> Miscegenation was a powerful social trait, since it was practically impossible to ensure sustained reproduction between very few white couples. To 'maintain', or whiten their colour, families practised endogamy and married their daughters with men from Brazil, the Atlantic Islands or Portugal (imperial administrators or military). The chronicler Cardornega (1680, vol. III: 28) wrote that the population of Luanda was predominantly mixed race and comparable to that of cities in Brazil and India (Goa). He made reference to 100 couples of white '*moradores*' (residents). A municipal source from the same period (1675) says that there were only 326 white people in Angola, 132 of whom lived in Luanda. Around 1730, the number of white people had gone down to 150.[…] Luanda's elite were merchants and slavers: they traded in and owned slaves. The heads of these families belonged to a dual social and cultural milieu. They mastered the codes of *Ancien Regime* society and sought to obtain all kinds of privileges from the Crown. They were also perfectly connected to networks of local African and Luso-Brazilian merchants, notably as a result of matrimonial alliances. During the seventeenth century, they began to exercise local political power in the *Senado da Câmara* or Municipality.[14]

13 C. Madeira Santos, *Entre l'empire portugais et l'Afrique centrale. Histoires locales, histoires connectées (XVIe -XXe siècles)*, Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches (HDR), December 2019, CESSMA, Université de Paris.

14 C. Madeira Santos, 'Sur l'esclavage interne depuis l'arriveé des Portugais jusqu'à sa disparition au XXe siècle', unpublished *memoir* for the defense of the HDR, December 2019, CESSMA, Université de Paris.

Therefore, in Africa south of the Sahara, the sentiment of being part of a political society and the defined rights of its members did not originate in the colonial period. Their history is complex and varied and has yet to be studied properly. Researchers long focused on the power wielded by those who were dominant, who are more widely known. European colonization was late, starting in the eighteenth century in the south of Africa and encompassing virtually the entire continent only at the very end of the nineteenth century. Learning a western-style citizenship commenced at the start of colonization, when the rights of the 'nationals' from the different states that had previously existed were successively abolished. External occupation by a colonial power, absolutist at the start, replaced any idea of African-style citizenship with one of inferior status, codified as that of the '*indigénat*.' Being a native was a non-citizen status. Henceforth, one of the objectives of the Africans was to reclaim their civil and political independence, granted very gradually by the colonizer. From this perspective, this was not a victory but a recovery of what they had lost upon losing their independence as 'occupied' people. These efforts have had an extended gestation period and have not yet been concluded. Generally, they have been studied in depth by contemporary historians.[15]

Maarten Prak rightly asserts that citizenship was not, as is argued in the older literature, an exclusively European phenomenon. He demonstrates this brilliantly, with the necessary nuances, based on several examples from outside Europe. Had he also consulted some works on ancient sub-Saharan realities, he could have observed to what extent his claims had already been confirmed by researchers in this part of the world. Because the writing of history on this continent is recent, this history also reflects awareness of recent global questions. The reason why I have elaborated at great length on the African situation is precisely that much of what Prak reveals could be included, admittedly with the necessary adjustments, in African history, which is a history like all others. Some of his allegations appeared evident to several Africanist historians, well before they became so to European researchers. I am not suggesting in any way that Africans have done 'like everybody else' or 'as well as' others – this is a well-known bias among Afrocentrists. Of course, the context was specific, the process was slowed or undermined by a series of brutal interventions at various moments in a history marked by successive instances of colonization and extend-

15 J.-L. Amselle, *Logiques métisses. Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris 1990); Cooper, *Citizenship between empire and nation*.

ed and intense slave trade. These events, however, gave rise to social, economic, political, military and cultural differentiation between the Africans in control (citizens?) and the rest. These differentiations have been studied fairly extensively by the specialists. This also gave rise to a great many longstanding contacts with the rest of the world, from the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, well before what is very oddly known as the 'discovery' of Africa by the Europeans, who in fact were the very last to discover its existence, finding it a millennium after the others did. Global interactions were very numerous. I learned a lot from the work by Prak on certain world regions. I dream of a work that might do greater justice to non-Western societies, perhaps with the help of a work that is in part collective, as one single researcher cannot know the entire world. This is why I regret that this subcontinent has been overlooked. In this piece, I tried to rectify briefly this shortcoming, thereby confirming the accuracy of the analyses of the author.

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t•seg The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History jaargang 17 2020 nummer 3