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# REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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article  
abstract

DIVERSE TYPOLOGIES OF REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (SSA) MAY BE IDENTIFIED, CURRENTLY SHAPING THE INCREASINGLY COMPLEX SCALES AND SPACE ASSOCIATED WITH REGIONALISM ON THE CONTINENT. THREE MAIN TYPES CAN BE ILLUSTRATED THAT, THOUGH NOT FITTING THE NARROW INSTITUTIONALISM OF MOST WORKS ON REGIONALISM, EXPLAIN AND DESCRIBE THE DAY-TO-DAY CONDITIONS ENCOUNTERED BY MOST AFRICAN CITIZENS. THESE ARE: NEO-LIBERAL REGIONAL GOVERNANCE; SOVEREIGNTY-BOOSTING REGIONAL GOVERNANCE; AND REGIONAL SHADOW GOVERNANCE. THIS ARTICLE SEEKS TO HELP EXPLAIN THE ORIGINS, THE MAIN ACTORS, AND THE PURPOSES OF THESE THREE VARIETIES OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE. IT IS ASSERTED THAT REGIONALISM IN SSA IS MORE COMPLEX (AND SOMETIMES ALSO MORE DETRIMENTAL) THAN SIMPLY BEING AN INSTRUMENT TO

ENHANCE AN AMBIGUOUS "NATIONAL INTEREST" (THE REALIST VIEW) OR THE PROCUREMENT OF THE "PUBLIC GOOD" OR "TRADE" (WHICH UNDERPINS LIBERAL EXPLANATIONS). POTENTIALLY, STATE ACTORS CREATE REGIONALIZATION IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE PRIVATE GOALS AND PROMOTE PARTICULAR (VESTED) INTERESTS RATHER THAN BROADER SOCIETAL INTERESTS. AS A RESULT, REGIONALIZATION WILL NOT NECESSARILY BE HARMONIOUS OR BENEFICIAL TO ALL PARTICIPANTS, CONTRADICTING THE LIBERAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE INHERENT WORTHINESS OF COMMERCE. ON THE CONTRARY, REGIONALIZATION MAY BE EXCLUSIONARY, EXPLOITATIVE, AND ALSO REINFORCE ASYMMETRIES AND IMBALANCES WITHIN SOCIETY AND WITHIN AND ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC SPACES.

REGIONALIZATION, NEOLIBERAL REGIONAL GOVERNANCE, SOVEREIGNTY-BOOSTING REGIONAL GOVERNANCE, REGIONAL SHADOW GOVERNANCE, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

keywords

This article is an attempt to provide an overview of the diverse typologies of regional governance in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), which are currently shaping the increasingly complex scales and space associated with regionalism on the continent. Three main types can be identified that, though not fitting the narrow institutionalism of most work on regionalism, explains and describes the day-to-day conditions encountered by most African citizens. These are: neoliberal regional governance; sovereignty-boosting regional governance; and regional shadow governance. This article seeks to help explain the origins, the main actors, and the purposes of these three varieties of regional economic governance.

It is asserted that regionalism in SSA is more complex (and sometimes also more detrimental) than simply being an instrument to enhance an ambiguous “national interest” (the realist view) or the procurement of the “public good” or “trade” (which underpins liberal explanations). Potentially, state actors create regionalization in order to achieve private goals and promote particular (vested) interests rather than broader societal interests. As a result, regionalization will not necessarily be harmonious or beneficial to all participants, contradicting the liberal assumptions about the inherent worthiness of commerce. On the contrary, regionalization may well be exclusionary, exploitative, and also reinforce asymmetries and imbalances within society and within and across geographic spaces.

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### NEOLIBERAL REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

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The great majority of formal present-day regionalist schemes in Africa are founded on the notion that the regional economic integration project should be market-driven, outward-looking, and remove obstacles to the “free” movement of goods, services, capital and investment within the regions as well as to the rest of the world. The overall intention is to ensure a closer integration into the world economy. The main justification of this strategy is that it contributes more to the process of (global) liberalization than it detracts from it. According to this line of thinking, which is often labelled “open regionalism” or “adjustment-adapted market integration,”<sup>1</sup> there is no contradiction in the great number of co-existing regional trading and economic integration schemes in Africa since they are all perceived to contribute to the same goal of liberalization, reduced protectionism, and downsizing of the role of the state in the economy. In Southern and Eastern Africa there is a number of co-existing regional interstate frameworks, such as the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Cross-Border Initiative/Regional Integration Facilitation Forum (CBI/RIFF), and the Indian Ocean Rim Trade Bloc (IORTB). A similar pattern exists in most other macro-regions in Africa, West Africa being particularly apposite in this regard. Although each regional project can be seen as a mode of governance in its own right, it is striking how the various projects conform to the same overall neoliberal belief system and broader “system of rule.”

The external and “global” dimension is crucial. The International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and American and European donor agencies

<sup>1</sup> Cross-Border Initiative 1995; World Bank 1989; Haarløv 1997.

strongly promote, enforce, and support neoliberal regional governance. However, although the African regional organizations and African states often claim to be supportive of neoliberal regional governance, there is also resistance. In this sense it is sometimes more of a model than the real existing mode of regional governance on the African continent.

Hand in hand with neoliberal governance at the macro-regional level, there is a simultaneous and perhaps even stronger logic at play on the micro-regional level. Southern Africa is a good illustration of such trends. The Southern African region is reconfigured by the implementation of a number of spatial development initiatives (SDIs).<sup>2</sup> These are targeted, short-term interventions with the main purpose to crowd-in private investment in order to unlock economic potential, to enhance regional economic integration, and to become integrated into the global economy. It is a bold neoliberal market paradigm that rules investment decisions. As stated by one of the main architects: “In order to be selected for inclusion in the SDI process, a project must offer a commercially viable return on investment, ie it must be a bankable project — a project which a commercial financial institution would be willing to back.”<sup>3</sup> The SDIs are governance mechanisms designed to quickly change legislation, change the role of the public/state, broaden the ownership base of the economy, and enhance market “competition.” As such they are designed to be part of a broader pattern of neoliberal regional governance in Southern Africa.

Considering the size of the SDI projects, they are weakly institutionalized. All are supposed to have “Corridor Planning Committees,” yet rarely meet and in fact are mostly moribund. This is unsurprising, given that these Planning Committees are supposed to be composed of representatives of all stakeholders along the entire corridor, who are supposed to plan coordinated land allocation and use. Yet this approach naively assumes that the different stakeholders have compatible interests or motives when in fact the profit motive which drives the entire SDI approach often clashes with common civil usage, often communal in nature. It is true that there is an intention to be informal and nonbureaucratic, as this allows for flexibility and adjustability to private and contextual demands, but this has often come at the expense of coherency.

However, such a mode of regional governance represents a radical shift from “older” formal and ambitious public modes of governance in favour of a notion that conforms to neoliberal globalization, whereby “too

<sup>2</sup> Africansdi.com; Söderbaum, Taylor 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Jourdan 1998: 20.

much government” is considered a systemic fault. According to the official view, there is only a need for minimal formal organizations and institutions since these are seen as rent seeking and bureaucratic anyway. The result is a narrow and exclusivist governance mechanism, geared only or primarily towards enhancing privatization and private investment projects and public-private partnerships (PPPs). This implies a loss of public participation and democratic control in the decision-making and implementation process. Again informality serves the interests of the powerful and wealthy, especially a small ruling political elite and transnational capitalist interests.<sup>4</sup>

“ THE PRINCIPLE OF FORMAL SOVEREIGNTY HAS CLEARLY BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN AFRICA. WHILE MANY AFRICAN STATES ARE EXTREMELY “WEAK”

Through the two-track model of open regionalism and SDIs, an informal but nevertheless strong coalition of economic and political elite interests, led by South African actors create and sustain neoliberal regional governance in Southern Africa, which also draws in (outward-oriented) economic and political elites in the neighbouring countries. As indicated above, to a significant extent this mode of governance is also actively promoted from the outside through external actors, such as the IFIs and the European and American donor community.

According to neoliberal regional governance, “good governance” is thus defined as “less government” and “getting the prices right,” rather than providing public goods and intervening in the economy and ensuring poverty reduction.<sup>5</sup> It indicates the commodification of basic material needs and everyday life, which only results in a retreat of the conventional welfare and development ambitions of the state. Poverty reduction is reduced to economic growth, and development projects must be “bankable” and “profitable.” The public is needed mainly to ensure an enabling environment for the private. In other words, the public has been subsumed under the private. It is a systemic fault in this type of governance to accommodate the interests of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the unemployed who lack the means to participate, much less “compete” on a global market.<sup>6</sup>

4 Söderbaum, Taylor 2003.

5 Thompson 2000: 41-58.

6 Mittelman 2000; Niemann 2000.

In accepting this ideology, the government/ state becomes the disciplining spokesperson of global economic forces — a “transmission belt for transnational capital”— rather than the protector against these forces, which is the classical task of mercantilist nation building and public governance.<sup>7</sup> Although all strategies are surrounded by rhetoric of people-centred development, the role of public institutions has been reduced to implement trade and investment liberalization or boost new bankable and commercially viable investment projects, often of gigantic proportions. Even public roads are commercialized. In this process the main function of the state has been reduced to a gigantic investment promotion agency. Although neo-patrimonialism is obviously not absent in Southern Africa, it remains true that the region is home to most of Africa’s “functioning” (to use a Western understanding of the term) states. Thus their ability, capacity and willingness to yield to private actors are perhaps stronger than in any part of the continent.

#### SOVEREIGNTY-BOOSTING GOVERNANCE

It should be noted that it is a widespread belief in the research field that “regional integration” requires a ceding of state sovereignty and national decision-making authority to supranational institutions.<sup>8</sup> Although this dichotomy between sovereignty and functioning regional integration is first and foremost a remnant from neofunctional theory, it continues to plague the debate. The notion that sovereignty constitutes an “obstacle” is to misunderstand ways through which state actors and political leaders are able to use regionalism and regional governance to bolster their regimes and governments. There is widespread evidence in Africa how state elites pool or rather boost their sovereignty through various types of regional cooperation and regional governance structures. This may or may not promote the “interests” of the citizenry and the broader public.

According to intergovernmentalist and neorealist logic, such state-steered regional governance can possibly be portrayed as a means to promote the “national interest.” Indeed, regional governance in order to pool or boost sovereignty equals the national interest. However, there are at least two main reasons why conventional state-centric and intergovernmental analysis is not enough, or is even misleading, and why it is necessary to make inquiries for whom and for what purposes such sovereignty-boosting emerges. First, due to their inherent “weakness,” most of the post-colonial states in Africa

7 See Cox 1996, Söderbaum, Taylor 2001: 675-695.

8 Haas 1964; Dieter, Lamb, Melber 2001: 63.

tend to be obsessed with absolute sovereignty and the formal status of their governments, rather than the promotion of “national” or “public” interest in a more comprehensive sense. Second, in many cases the so-called state is much less than what it pretends to be: the type of regional governance designed to boost the government is exclusivist and centralized, “reflecting the perceptions of government leaders, small groups of civil servants and perhaps also key bilateral and multilateral donors.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, as we have noted, often the “state” is not much more than an (neopatrimonial) interest group, and in the worst instances it has degenerated into a post-modern mafia syndicate (consider for instance Liberia under Charles Taylor or Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe).

To understand how certain governments use regional economic governance to boost the official status and sovereignty of their governments, one has to consider the nature of statehood in Africa. It is widely agreed that the states in Africa are “weak.” However, these states enjoy international recognition even though they often lack substantial and credible “statehood” by the criteria of international law. The result is that in their international relations weak states tend to place heavy emphasis on formal and absolute sovereignty — that is, the maintenance of existing borders and the principle of nonintervention in domestic affairs — because it enhances the power of the governing political elite and its ability to stay in power.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the institution of formal sovereignty is the justification for their continuation and survival as states. The principle of formal sovereignty has clearly been successful in Africa. While many African states are extremely “weak,” the state system and the old colonial boundaries have, with a few exceptions, remained intact — seemingly everlasting. The result is a somewhat paradoxical situation with “weak” states and rather “strong” or at least “stable” regimes.<sup>11</sup>

The argument raised here is that there are many instances whereby political leaders and regimes are using regional governance to promote rather than to reduce absolute state sovereignty and its legitimacy. In many places around Africa ruling political leaders engage in a rather intense diplomatic game, whereby they praise regionalism and sign treaties, such as free trade agreements. West Africa is a fruitful example. Ever since the foundation of ECOWAS, an increasing number of members and sectors have been added. In this way ECOWAS’s political leaders have been able to create an image that the organization is constantly developing. This has enabled them to be perceived as promoters of the goals and values of regionalism, which in turn

9 Simon 2003: 71.

10 Clapham 1996.

11 Bøås, Dokken 2002: 138.

has enabled them to raise the profile and status of their (often) authoritarian governments.

The problem is that this has not been to serve public interest but rather a more myopic objective to raise the formal status of their crumbling governments. To implement policies is not the first priority. Instead, ECOWAS decision-making is highly formalized, and to some extent even ritualized. This social practice is then repeated and institutionalized at a large number of ministerial and summit meetings, which in reality involves no real debate and no wider consultation within (or between) member states. Many other regional organizations in Africa function in a similar fashion, including SADC. For the political leaders, it is a matter of constructing an image of state building and of promoting important values. As Sidaway and Gibb note, discussing SADC:

“[F]ormal participation in SADC is another way whereby the states seek to confirm, fix and secure the appearance and power of “sovereignty.” Rather like the boundaries and colour schemes of political maps, participation in fora such as SADC is a way in which the state is actively represented as a real, solid, omnipresent authority. In doing so, the fact that it is a contested, socially constructed (not simply natural) object is obscured, and states would have us take them for granted as the natural objects of governance and politics.”<sup>12</sup>

From governments’ and political leaders’ point of view this type of regional diplomacy is often “successful.” The problem is that many post-colonial states in Africa are to an overwhelming extent ruled by personal leaders, who are often portrayed as embodying the idea of the state. The personal rulers often use the coercive instruments of the state to monopolize power and to further their own interests, including denial or restriction of political rights and opportunities of other groups.<sup>13</sup> Whether this type of regional governance also promotes broader public interests, such as democratization and human security, remains an open question. Its viability, strength, legitimacy, and desirability rests with how the ruling regime is interpreted.

12 Sidaway, Gibb 1998: 179.

13 Clapham 1996.

## REGIONAL SHADOW GOVERNANCE

It is widely recognized that there are many vibrant and dynamic processes of de facto and informal market activities all over the African continent. Although these may sometimes be understood as “survival strategies” created by the poor, the excluded, and other non-state actors, it is important to recognize that many researchers draw attention to the fact that “state/regime” actors are deeply entrenched in informal market activities with the purpose to promote patronage networks and (hidden) private self-interests. For instance, it is widely agreed that the parallel economy in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which exceeds the official economy in size, has expanded as a consequence of the systematic corruption, the theft of state revenues, and the personal rule of successive presidents. In the case of Sierra Leone this type of state was referred to by William Reno as the “Shadow State;” a state where the formal façade of political power based upon informal markets sheltered corrupt politicians.<sup>14</sup>

It is often shown that these types of activities extend beyond the borders of the Shadow State. Stephen Ellis and Janet MacGaffey elucidate the crucial relationship between politics and economics and between the domestic and the international level:

”International trade in Africa, and inter-continental trade particularly, occupies a crucial strategic position chiefly because of the scarcity of foreign exchange which is necessary to import manufactured goods and which can play a vital role in the construction of a political power-base. Government ministers and officials regulate access to hard currency either by their control of the state, or by going into business themselves or through nominees including members of their own family, or indirectly, by forming alliances with traders. The interplay of the resulting trade and clientist networks is an ingredient in most successful political careers in Africa.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the international dimension is mentioned in the literature, the regional dimension seldom receives enough attention. The argument raised here is that we can increase our understanding of what is going on by analyzing shadow networks as a particular mode of regional governance, that is, as a particular (but) malign “system of rule” for goal achievement.

14 Reno 1995.

15 Ellis, MacGaffey 1996: 31.

The viability of informal shadow activities depends on states’ lack of transparency, declining financial capacities, and territorial control. It also depends on the exploitation of boundary disparities, and demands their preservation in order to prosper. For instance, dominant rentier-elite factions in the BLSN-countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia) were reluctant to renegotiate the Southern African Customs Union and were ‘dragging their feet because the old formula [was] advantageous to them.’<sup>16</sup> It is a feature of regional economic governance in many parts of SSA that certain state elites and rentier classes actively seek to preserve existing boundary disparities and also seek the continued failure of regional organizations and policy-frameworks in order to further their own private interests. Sometimes the strategy is less subtle. For instance, in Central Africa, ‘a number of state elites in the Great Lakes and southern African regimes have ceased to use the mantle of sovereignty to promote the collective good. Instead, they have used it to help bolster their own patronage networks and weaken those of potential challengers.’<sup>17</sup> This mode of regional shadow governance grows from below, and it is designed for personal accumulation and neither for the regulation of formal regional economic interaction, nor for the encouragement of formal-public modes of regional governance.



THROUGH REGIONAL SHADOW GOVERNANCE STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS COME TOGETHER IN DIFFUSE AND VOLATILE ECONOMIC NETWORKS IN ORDER TO PROFIT FROM VIOLENCE AND FROM UNDERGROUND ECONOMIES

It needs to be recognized that these activities and networks are inherently inequitable and extremely uneven. They accumulate power and resources at the top, to the rich and powerful, and to those with jobs, including the urban poor and the rural producers. Small-scale cross-border traders have a disadvantage since the economies of scale are “only for those who can pay the necessary bribes.”<sup>18</sup> The only “popular” dimension of these networks can be found in their capacity to adjust to market demands and in the ruthless exploitation of populations that are confronted with a diminishing of alternatives to satisfy their needs.<sup>19</sup>

16 Sidaway, Gibb 1998: 178.

17 Taylor, Williams 2001: 281.

18 Bach 1999: 162.

19 Bach 1999: 62.

The attempts to restrict these activities have been counterproductive. In the new (neoliberal and post-Cold War) context where the state apparatus itself offers fewer opportunities for private accumulation and where formal barriers between countries have been reduced, shadow states have gone regional. In the process of going regional they have expanded to more criminal activities, such as new trades in illicit drugs (including heroin, mandrax, and cocaine), arms, light weapons, and other merchandise of war. In fact, these economic networks can even be actively involved in the creation and promotion of war, conflict, and destruction, as seen for instance in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe.<sup>20</sup> The DRC is a prime example of this for here:

“Far from being a humanitarian and developmental disaster which sabotages the nascent [African] Renaissance, for well-placed elites and businessmen the wars in the Great Lakes region (...) offer potentially substantial resources for those able to exploit them. This explains much of the foreign interventions in the DRC: it is not only about preserving national security and defeating enemies, it is also about securing access to resource-rich areas and establishing privatised accumulation networks that can emerge and prosper under conditions of war and anarchy. In this sense, war assumes the characteristics of a business venture, the beneficiaries of which are unlikely to abandon the venture easily.”<sup>21</sup>

Through regional shadow governance state and non-state actors come together in diffuse and volatile economic networks in order to profit from violence and from underground economies. It is a devilishly well-calculated terror war and obviously has little to contribute to human development and security or for that matter the broader national interest.

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## CONCLUSION

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Three particular modes of regional economic governance are highlighted in this article: neoliberal regional governance; sovereignty-boosting governance; and regional shadow governance. The first is perhaps the dominating mode of regional governance in contemporary Africa. It emerges in many corners of Africa and in different guises. It is pushed under continental African frameworks, such as the New Partnership for

Africa's Development (NEPAD), various macro- and sub-regional economic integration schemes as well as cross-border micro-regional initiatives, such as the development corridors and SDIs in Southern Africa. Neoliberal regional governance is created by coalitions and networks of governments, big business, IFIs and donors, albeit with national governments formally determining policies. Moreover, although neoliberal regional governance is built on a certain degree of formality, its overarching strategy and direction is broader and more important than intergovernmental regional organizations, such as SADC, CBI and COMESA.

Neoliberal regional governance seeks to promote the public interest, so the official discourse goes. However, the fundamental problem is that the public interest is subsumed under the private one. Neoliberal regional governance reinforces a process of neoliberal globalization, which lacks ethical content and contains a drastically reduced role for public interests since this governance depends on global market demands and on access to international capital, and does not focus on poverty reduction and public goods. In its detrimental form neoliberal regional governance implies a diffuse and turbulent system of competing and changing authority structures, with the consequence of “exclusion” as well as a drastically reduced role for the state/government as we know it. Nevertheless, under the right conditions this mode of regional governance has the potential to be transformed into more inclusive, democratic, and just governance structures, primarily through the mobilization of local business and the involvement of civil society.

The second mode of regional governance highlighted is designed to boost sovereignty and national government. It represents a system of rule with the regime largely in control, assuming the privilege of intervention by reference to a value system focused on political order, state stability, and national sovereignty. It is created and promoted by those actors pushing such an agenda, mainly political leaders, governments, and securocrats. It is based on a certain degree of formality in order to obtain legitimacy, or to make informal competitors (including rebels and quite often political opposition) illegitimate. Sometimes it emerges as a direct result of neoliberal regional governance, since the latter may actually undermine both national sovereignty and a functioning government. The desirability of sovereignty-boosting regional governance depends to a large extent on the interpretation of whether the involved regime/government is considered to be ruling for or against the people and the public interest (that is what sovereignty is used for). For instance, when figures such as Robert Mugabe or Charles Taylor are in control, there are good reasons to be sceptical. Questionable political figures such as Charles Taylor and Robert Mugabe may at the same time be

20 MacLean 2002: 513-528.

21 Taylor, Williams 2001: 273.

actively involved in the third type of regional governance, that is, regional shadow governance.

In this article I suggest that sometimes the Shadow State has gone “regional,” which is partly a consequence of neoliberalism and the fact that there is not much left to plunder of state resources. In regional shadow governance, a small number of regime actors use the formal state apparatus as a façade and join forces with a limited number of informal or criminal private actors, private security companies, and/or military leaders to bolster their own private interests. This mode of regional governance occurs in many parts of Africa, first and foremost where the Shadow State exists. One of the most tragic examples is the regional intervention by ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in West Africa. Although often referred to as a success story in the literature, it is clear that ECOMOG became a part of the political economy of violence that kept the conflicts going in the West African war zone. Important sections of the ECOMOG troops actively took part in the crimes committed against civilians and became heavily involved in warlord politics and plunder. The questionable role of the ECOMOG force is perhaps best illustrated by how it came to be known in Liberia as “Every Commodity and Movable Object Gone.” A similar type of logic prevails in the wars in the Great Lakes region.

One general assertion I wish to emphasize is that there is a pluralism of modes of regional economic governance in Africa. Sometimes the three modes may be distinct and not closely related. Sometimes only one or two prevail within a given region. At other times they may co-exist without much interaction. Yet, at certain times the three different modes of regional governance overlap and stand in a rather complex (and sometimes dialectic) relationship with one another. As a result they may persist in spite of their sometimes detrimental and contradictory effects.

Neoliberal regional governance is perhaps the dominating mode of regional governance, at least as a discourse, in most regions of Africa. The fact that the regional dimensions are an integral part and fit the broader neoliberal strategy is what makes it rather pervasive. Sometimes it constitutes more of a model (promoted from the outside) rather than the reality of regional governance in Africa. Sovereignty-boosting regional governance may occur for many different reasons. As indicated previously, during the last decade it has often emerged in response to the challenge posed by neoliberalism and globalization to the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state/regime. Hence, sovereignty-boosting regional governance may emerge as a strategy to rescue what neoliberalism challenges. Regional shadow governance may

also be related to the two other forms of governance and may be explained as a consequence of neoliberalism and structural adjustments, which have left little to plunder of state assets. As a result certain corrupt regime actors (and certain businessmen) go regional. And since they need the state and formal regionalism as a façade to continue with their rent-seeking and plunder, they also need to pursue sovereignty-boosting regional governance as a shelter. Taken together, this picture of partly overlapping and often informal and private modes of governance is what makes Africa an intriguing and heterogeneous continent with more complexity compared to what can be detected through the dominating approaches in the research field. Since the cases of this study are taken from the current empirical scene in Africa, there is a possibility that this scene may look very different tomorrow. An optimistic viewpoint would argue that regionalism in Africa is a “work in progress” and that the end goal of neoliberal regional spaces with formalized institutions and a market-oriented framework ostensibly promoting growth and development will take time, but will emerge. In this reading, problems that may be identified are teething troubles that can—and will—be overcome. And indeed, as this occurs, good governance will progressively develop and eventually drive a virtuous circle of institutions (both national and regional) working hand in hand to promote development. It is certainly true that some of the regional bodies are relatively new. But equally, this rather optimistic reading tends to disembodify regional governance from the nature of the state and the states that are supposed to be integral to the regional project. As any organisation is only as strong as its members, it is hard to argue that “good” (i.e. neoliberal) regional governance will, or even can, emerge from the roots in which it finds itself in much of Africa.

Thus according to the more pessimistic view, it looks as if these modes of economic governance, perhaps in combination, give a good clue to the current political and economic system in Africa. In this reading, the more predatory nature of the state and the neopatrimonial political culture that dominates in most part of Africa asserts itself over and above the ideal-type model of neoliberal regional governance. In this reading, the economic rationality that supposedly underpins the formal regional model (itself often borrowed ad hoc from the European experience) is far more likely to slide into the (at best) sovereignty-boosting regional modes of governance and (at worst) into the regional shadow governance systems of clandestine networks, contraband trade, smuggling and corruption—all overseen by local Big Men at the apex of various elaborate regional complexes.



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