



Kenya's Electoral Crisis: The Political Culture of Tricksters and Masks

By Paul Goldsmith



Political culture is an elusive creature. It is pervasive but invisible, like the oxygen that energizes our social organization and economy. It is also colorless and odorless, the carbon monoxide that suffocates the public interest. Like the quanta of particle physics, it inhabits a difficult to pinpoint state straddling legal-constitutional rationality and people's behavioral orientations. The oil that lubricates the wheels of power, it is also the glue that holds the system together. Red in tooth and claw, it is an essential component of peaceful coexistence.

An agricultural economist colleague once asked me, 'all this insight into culture you anthropologists generate is fascinating, but what are we supposed to do with it?' There are no simple answers to this question, but we can try.

1. Political Culture Defined

Political culture is formally defined as the "set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process, including the underlying assumptions and rules that govern political behavior. The dean of political culture studies, Gabriel Almond, cited the terribly destructive "irrational" events of twentieth century like the World Wars and the Holocaust to

underscore its importance, in contrast to rationality, for explaining social life.

The concept's lineage dates back Plato who used it to explain the dispositions differentiating Greek city-states like Athens and Sparta. This comparative approach is often more useful for practical purposes than for diagnosing the intricacies of a given political system. The contrasts between the political cultures in this region, for example, can be a useful entry point for examining the different pathways nations are traveling in search of adaptive governance as well as the usual historical, environmental and other parameters guiding the journey. This in turn connects to the idea political culture is a useful indicator of the system's health, viability, and most distinctive features.

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Ethiopia, for example, presents a very strong internalized sense of order. This helps account for why, after Mengistu's regime fell, the country continued to function normally for two weeks without a government. Civil servants went to their offices and the business of ordinary life continued without disruption and looting. This not to say violence is alien to the country; the sustained bloodshed of the red and white terror is hardly ancient history and the government has shown itself to be quite adept at using force to leverage its objectives. The state does go about it in a more organized fashion than neighboring countries, and the same can be said for the civilians: as one acquaintance in Addis Ababa informed me, “we let these guys do their thing for a long time but when things reach a certain point we pick up our weapons and get rid of them.”

Abyssinian imperial tradition helps explain this particular set of attitudes and values, especially in contrast to the conflicts raging in neighboring South Sudan and Somalia. The example of Somaliland, in contrast, contradicts the notion that lineage based societies are conducive to clan-based violence.

The more self-explanatory aspects of the term are expressed in familiar truisms like the ‘culture of impunity’ or ‘subculture of violence, and tired clichés like ‘there are no permanent friends or enemies’, and ‘politics is a dirty game’, or more homegrown expressions like ‘to slip is not to fall’ one hears in Kenya. These indicators of modern political culture underscore the rupture between the more seamless quality traditional African political cultures and the contemporary variations that replaced them, including the culture of unchecked power and domination.

2. In Search of African Political Culture

Cultural exemplars are typically context-specific, by nature a derivative of culture proper, and of which Africa has long been a rich reservoir. In general, African cultures established clear boundaries between generations and groups, defined clear mechanisms for participation, and incorporated belief in higher powers and recognized the agency of forces operating outside the natural world. Politics was for the most part embedded in the internal order of these societies and recognized the overlap between the material and the unseen world. The uncertainty embedded in the environment gave rise to mythical representations like the character of the trickster who was often represented by an animal, the most famous being [Ananse](#) the spider of Akan-Ashanti traditions.

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Leadership was often distributed across generations and genders, though less so in the case of women in many societies, and included pathways for integration and negotiation with other groups. Culture is by definition plastic and adaptable, and institutions such as age grade organization and elders' councils facilitated the transfer of problem-solving skills and wisdom across generations. In the areas that gave rise to centralized structures, kings operated more as managers and coordinators who oversaw the redistribution of resources; the culture of gift giving, dance and music, rituals and rights of passage featured prominently, as did the tradition of sacrifice to propitiate to the gods and the higher powers. Rainmakers and seers occupied a prominent position in many cultures. Violation of social rules and the unseen order could bring misfortune upon the individual and the group.

European intervention effectively deculturalized many areas of Africa with ramifications for post-colonial governance. The problem was most acute in Anglophone countries. In a recent article in the Guardian, [Chizidie Obioma](#) describes colonialism as a process where "the civilisations of the peoples, their various cultures and traditions, their religions, political philosophies and institutions" were effectively hollowed out.

In any event, the transfer of state institutions at independence came with the attendant problems of fossilized ethnic identities, marginalization of indigenous institutions, detention without trial, and other repressive mechanisms adopted by the new state elites. The pattern coincides with multiple other examples in developing regions where political culture is often reducible to the influence invested in national elites. The following decades saw diverse attempts to reconstitute a national political culture based on different ideologies including efforts to indigenize the Marxist orientation behind many liberation movements.

One analyst explained the political culture of democratic transition in Latin American countries by underscoring the link between the material aspirations of the general public and the goal of replicating the greater opportunity and ability enjoyed by the wealthy classes. This equates to the quest for democracy incentivized by material success. The caveat here is that for generations, that region's political culture was shaped by the contest between 'the people' and small cartels shaping their nation's key political institutions and controlling most of the wealth. These conditions gave rise to Neo-Marxist models that were exported to Africa in the form of dependency theory and critiques of neo-colonialism, but the political culture they fed elsewhere never really took root in African soil.

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The African socialism of that era was a convenient catchall term. Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* was arguably the most serious attempt to inculcate a political culture based on indigenous tradition. The idea of African socialism was a common meme across the continent after independence, but took different forms. The African Socialism featuring in Kenya's Sessional Paper No. 10 provided a convenient wrapper for expanding the inequality associated with the country's agrarian capitalism, while others like Kwame Nkrumah parlayed the term into a vehicle for grandiose infrastructural projects. On more than one occasion civil servants explained it to me by saying, 'we Africans like to

socialize so we get together somewhere and share beer and talk’.

The centralized system behind Syad Barre’s contrived concept of *hantiwadaag*, or camel-sharing, scientific socialism was another example. During the early years of his rule Syad Barre sincerely attempted to extrapolate his *hantiwadaag* socialism into economic reality by nationalizing most of the country’s formal sector economy and by devoting a third of the government budget to setting up a system of agricultural cooperatives, including a pilot scheme of fourteen cooperatives for herders based on the allocation of grazing blocks and drilling boreholes for water. His most ambitious cooperative-based project was the conversion of 90,000 drought stricken nomads into fisherman. Other initiatives including processing facilities for milk, meat and fish canning, and sugar enjoyed a measure of success during the 1970s before everything unraveled following his ill-fated support for the occupation of the Ogaden.

In the end, the political culture of irredentism triumphed over the scientific management of national resources. Such case studies provide ammunition for academic critics who regard “the very concept of political culture as epiphenomenal and superfluous,” according one scholar based at the University of Warwick. Even so, the idea keeps on coming back.

In 2009 I participated in a research project entitled *Political Culture, Governance, and the State in Africa*. Our objective was to examine the influence of political culture across the continent. We recruited a diverse collection of academics and analysts to explore how culture and politics interact, and the import of political culture in African societies where institutionalization is weak and emergent national political cultures reflect a variety of diverse influences and forces.

I reviewed and read close to sixty papers, many of which were interesting, well documented, and insightful. Some featured captivating but complicated titles; one of my favorites was *African Cultural Political Renaissance: Strategies, Identities, Ambiguities, And Confrontations*. Quite a few were also dense, abstract, and not easy to read. They invariably illuminated the culture of politics in diverse African settings and contexts from South Africa to Tunisia, and discussed issues from the role of the military, to capacity building and indigenous conflict management. However, none of them directly addressed the basic thesis that sought to pin down how political culture articulates within African settings to influence political processes and their outcomes.

The same proved true during our three-day meeting, despite the project’s curator, Professor Abdalla Bujra, attempts to steer discussion toward this end. The case studies demonstrated that culture is integral to politics, and that governance draws from a variety of sources both within a given national arena and from without. The practice of socialism, democracy, participatory governance, and resource redistribution as well as relentless exploitation and opportunism all have precedents on the communal level. Pluralism is the problem; the richness of indigenous political culture contrasts with the poverty of its institutional counterparts. They negate each other in a manner that tended to make the conclusions of the papers amorphous in the end.

Perhaps this was understandable insofar as it is difficult too isolate the contribution of political culture when one is so immersed in the chase, so to speak. Culture is like camouflage, and its influence derives from its ability to blend so well into the background.

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But there are success stories. The unrecognized Republic of Somaliland’s retreat from the brink of

civil war through protracted dialogue is one such exemplar that underscores the utility of inclusive participation. The long discussions among clan elders in Boramo received most of the attention, but the contribution of organizations with names like Moonlight and Havioko that served as conduits for women and youth were equally critical to the emergence of a political culture aligned with the society's internal cultural endowment.

Still, the shift from democratically inspired liberation movements to democratic governance has been a major problem as most other cases illustrate. The contrast between Eritrea's remarkable guerilla campaign and the dictatorship of Isias Afworki is probably the most extreme case, and as one [South African commentator](#) details, a supportive political culture is essential for democracy to work.

3. Identity, Culture, and Power

I came across an interesting [commentary](#) by Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt on *culturalism* and politics while doing research for our political culture conference. The culturalism argument they address is predicated on the view that individuals are determined by their culture, and that cultures have a claim to special rights and protections even if at the same time they violate individual rights. This is the 'each culture in its own place, each culture in its own country' right-wing response to multiculturalism and globalization.

Any politically aware individual alive and breathing today will recognize how the issue of identity-based politics has gained traction since the time of our meeting. The American political scientist, Samuel Huntington, captured the essence of these developments in 2004 when he predicted that we are entering a time when what you support will not matter as much as *who you are*.

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This has been the default in Africa for quite some time, where many cultures ended up sharing the same political space. Who you are and where you were born often has a direct impact on individual and group prospects and opportunities. The departing colonialists assumed that the transfer of Western political institutions and legal institutions would solve the problem. The problem in Africa is that African constitutions, according to Kenya's illustrious legal scholar, H.W.O. Okoth-Ogendo, are easily ripped up or ignored because the real charter organizing political life is a nation's power map, which typically reflects ethnic identity and who controls the state.

Change through legal and institutional methods is gaining ground, but there is a long way to go. When institutions lack autonomy and rule of law is weak, political culture functions as a system of unwritten codes and principles. Rules continue to be defined by the political elite, and this is often the case even when they are not in power.

This form of political culture is as much about assumptions as values. There are rules of thumb, like the common meme that 'no incumbent government loses an election before its constitutional term has expired'. Acceptance of this assumption leads to the familiar discourse that treats the government of the day and the opposition as different sides of the same coin.

The authors of the culturalism essay cover similar terrain when they ask why the left is unable to

muster their intellectual powers to counter the culturalism of the right. Erikson and Stjernfelt observe that this is due to the fact that “they allow themselves to be blinded by the same cultural views as their homologous opponents: they are themselves culturalists.” The inability to recognize their similarities limits to their ability to analyse their opponents’ position.

In the African context, the same problem translates into the often-cited view that criticism of the management of the political process is a self-serving ploy to advance the interests of the opposition’s ethnic coalition at the expense of national development. Even though they claim to represent reform and renewal, says the government in power, they subscribe to the same political culture as we do. In Kenya, the period of coalition government following the 2007 electoral meltdown added substance to this narrative.

Kenyan political campaigns typically use this ‘we are the same but they are poor and hungry’ discourse to deflect attention from issues of misrule and corruption. During the 2017 campaigns, the Presidential contenders broke new ground by skipping the debates organized by the national media houses. This confirmed the sad reality that in Kenya elections, it is the method more than the theory that determines the outcome.

4. The Political Culture of Tricksters and Masks

The root meaning of *siasa*, the Swahili term for politics, is order. The brutal but more clinical use of state violence referred to in the Ethiopian example above conforms to this definition of politics. In many other cases, the meaning of the term is inverted.

In a 2002 volume entitled *Criminalization of the African State*, Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou (2002) provide a deeper analysis of the pathologies of African governance. Bayart’s contribution explores the role of the trickster archetype, which appeared particularly relevant to Moi’s style of leadership. In *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, an earlier volume in the same series, Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascal Daloz detail how disorder and violence are used to maintain the neo-patrimonial *status quo*. They explore the darker side of the forces unleashed by the mandarins of the neo-liberal political economy and pour cold water on the idea that the likes of civil society and structural reforms will lead to improved governance.

The advancement of political culture in these analyses tends to form a circular relationship with institutional development, posing a chicken-and-egg question of which comes first. The problem makes it tempting to advocate for more soft power and support for artistic works and civic education in order to advance the cause.

Some of my academic colleagues do not like this line of analysis, but they miss the fact that it is, for many nations, an unavoidable stage in Africa’s political development. The authors of these analyses do not posit this state of affairs is the endpoint, or a permanent condition. They push us to look deeper and to disentangle the complicated role of culture at the intersection of politics and economy.

Almond and his acolytes cloak the concept of political culture in discussions of political socialization, loyalty and human identity, the cultivation of civic virtue, historical determinants explaining the variations among political traditions, and the ‘ordered subjective realm of politics’ which gives meaning to the polity and discipline to institutions. The advancement of political culture in these analyses tends to form a circular relationship with institutional development, posing a chicken-and-

egg question of which comes first. The problem makes it tempting to advocate for more soft power and support for artistic works and civic education in order to advance the cause. Of course, this is part of the solution. But interpreting what transpires in the shadows is more useful than the positivism of the Anglo-American tradition at this stage of the game.

Kenyans have consistently associated events like the departure of Moi and the passage of a new constitution with a new political dispensation, but the trickster never left. The instrumentalisation of disorder to serve political ends is still part of the game, as the 2017 elections indicated once again.

The electoral chicanery disrupting the past three electoral cycles has become part of the country's culture of politics, and in turn encouraged resort to disorder and civil disobedience by the opposition to combat it. One cannot be separated from the other even though the intentional use of disorder justifies the opposition's efforts to fight back. These elections have traumatized the economy and body politic while cloaking the very idea of national unity in verbal abuse and blood.

The angst conveyed by Wafula Chebukati in the wake of the flawed elections of last August mirrored the horror of his predecessor Samuel Kivuitu ten years earlier. The mocking visage of the Electoral Commission's executive, Ezra Chiloba, in contrast, signified how shameless in contrast the Masters of Deception have become. His glib explanation for the Commission's colossal failings, dished out to an incredulous public, remade him into a poster boy for the shadow school of analysis—or perhaps more accurately, the mask concealing the venality of the usual suspects.

Kenya's elections have become masquerades that integrate all of these functions. Chiloba put on his mask and played God with the country's future.

Like the trickster archetype, the mask has a long pedigree in human culture. The ancients believed masks imbued the wearer with some kind of unimpeachable authority. In rituals, masks allow humans to assume the role of the gods, or to lend credence to a person's claim on a given social role. Kenya's elections have become masquerades that integrate all of these functions. Chiloba put on his mask and played God with the country's future.

National elections are participatory cultural spectacles that begin with hope but end in tragedy. Episodic incidents of electoral violence, political assassinations, and mass protests turned violent are predictable features of Kenya's political arena. From the perspective of Kenya's political culture, these episodes have also acted as *kafara* - blood sacrifices - that primed the system to accept change before plunging the nation into the kind of full-scale conflict experienced by neighboring states.

The 2017 version, however, was different. The Supreme Court parted the clouds long enough to establish an important precedent. The battle took place in the courts instead of the streets this time around. Those who found the confirmation of what is in effect a *nusu kikombe* instead of a *nusu-mkate* government—whether or not the glass is half empty or half-full is irrelevant at this juncture[1]—a cause for celebration are deluding themselves. The fat lady did not sing this time around.

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[1] The coalition government that emerged out of the post-electoral violence of 2008 is often referred to as *nusu-mkate*, or a half-loaf government due to the division of positions between the two

parties.

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