

What African State are you referring to? Different ontologies different States

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ontology.*

Abstract — *African states have been analysed under the label of “failed states”, “collapsed states” and “predatory states”. In this sense, without the intention of analysing the scope of transformations resulting from changes of political regimes, this qualitative essay based on literature review, analyses how the use of ontologies has produced different “images” of African States. It is argued that the images produced are anchored to the dominant objectivist and subjectivist ontologies of the 70s and 80s, which applied in the analysis of African States are very limited. Accordingly, it is suggested the adoption of intersubjectivist ontology, which, favouring the joint construction of meanings and knowledge, is more apt to capture the organizational dynamics that have been influenced by ubuntu (“I am because we are; I can only be one person through others”) considered the African philosophy of life, management, and leadership.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, Peter Evans published an article in which he addressed different types of states in the so-called Third World which are: the developmental states, the predators and “other devices”. While looking at three countries on three continents, categorization does not prevent hasty scholars from using it as representative of other states on the same continent. Thus, analysed in a continuum, according to Evans (1989), Japan appeared, at the top, as a developmental state, Brazil, in the middle, as “another apparatus” and, then Zaire, at the end, as a predatory state.

Years later, Call (2008) criticized the proliferation of labels such as “failed states” and “collapsed states”; the presentation of Liberia as a predatory state and Somalia as a collapsed state. Similar cases are multiplying, Bellucci (2010, p. 10) states that when considering that they were constituted by colonial law, African states are seen under the label of “external”, “quasi-states”, “artificial” or “pseudo-states” “. However, as if an outlier, Botswana appears in contemporary literature as the “African case of

success” echoing the observation made seminally by (Acemoglu; Johnson & Robinson, 2003).

In contrast, Call (2008) points out, as possible reasons, among several, cultural values and Western paternalism as aspects underlying the categorization of failed states, almost all, in the so-called Third World. In the same vein, seeking to re-conceptualize the notion of a failed state in Western knowledge, Jakwa (2016) argues that Zimbabwe is not a weak, fragile or bankrupt state, but also a strongly unstable state that highlights the need to re-conceptualize democracy in Africa.

Analyzing the political changes that have occurred in the continent, Cardoso et al. (2002) question if we are facing the same Africa. If so, what is the real scope of these changes? In this sense, without intending to analyze the scope of the transformations resulting from the change in the political regime, we question how the use of different ontologies has produced a different Africa and how intersubjective ontology can contribute to transcend the limitations of objectivist and subjectivist ontology.

Thus, it is argued that the disparity of points of view, which tend to be contradictory, is due to the use of

different ontologies that vary between the objectivist and the subjectivist. In other words, the use of different ontologies results in the construction of different objects of analysis. It is shown that the use of objectivist ontology is compatible with the essentialist view of African State as a state that once was, but that tends to not be, the “Africa invented” in the observation of (Mudimbe, 2013).

In turn, the subjectivist refers to the unfinished state-building characteristic marked by advances and setbacks, which Bierschenk & De Sardan (2014) call *Statehood*. As a way to overcome this dichotomy, even because there are dilemmas with the “African forms of self-registration” (Mbembe, 2001), it is proposed the use of an intersubjective ontology (Cunliffe, 2010) that transcends the limitations presented by the objectivist and subjectivist ontologies.

According to Quijano (2002), the hegemonic rationality imposed by Eurocentrism from the 17th century onwards based on the radical dualism between “reason” and “body” and between “subject” and “object” in the production of knowledge that is characterized by being a-historical, reductionist and homogenizing, is in crisis.

One of the evidence is observed when the Cameroonian philosopher Mbembe (2015) says “from the point of view of knowledge production, it turned out that we know very advantageously what African societies are not (or should be), and less what they really are” (p.376). And Quijano (2002) observes that the state as a universal central form of control over collective authority and the modern nation-state as its hegemonic variant is one of the structural elements of the coloniality of power today.

Mignolo (2002, p.59) explains that the expansion of Western capitalism implied the expansion of Western epistemology in all its ramifications, from the instrumental reason that accompanied capitalism and the industrial revolution, to the theories of the State, to the criticism of capitalism and State.

This work is structured in six parts. After this introduction, we present the approaches of the African State analyzed under the objectivist ontology and its implications, in the third part, the African State under the lens of subjectivist ontology and its developments, following that, the analysis under the intersubjectivity ontology and, finally, the conclusion.

II. THE AFRICAN STATE UNDER THE OBJECTIVIST ONTOLOGY

Cunliffe (2010) enlightens that the objectivist assumptions maintain that reality is concrete data, something that is external. However, through the use of scientific methods, “real” knowledge is built based on observable and measurable regularities, laws, and

standards. In turn, according to the author, intersubjective researchers are based on hermeneutic phenomenology, relationally responsive social constructionism, and the notion of dialogism.

The difference between constructivist and social constructionist researchers draws attention. According to Cunliffe (2014), the interest of the constructivists is the generation of theoretical explanations from practice and their work is not reflective because they do not see themselves as part of the construction process. Social constructionists, in turn, focus on how meaning or practical theories are created among people in their embodied and relationally responsive dialogue and see themselves as part of the meaning-building process (Ibid, p.483).

Aware of these possibilities and of the various labels attributed to the State of Africa, in *The danger of a single story*, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie draws attention to the starting point of the narratives about the African States. He observes that starting the story with the failure of the African States and not with the colonial creation of the African State, the story told will be totally different (Adichie, 2009).

This view of the author can be seen in divergence of ideas between authors. According to Njoku and Bondarenko (2018), the construction of the modern state of Africa is the product of the centuries-old process of colonization. Post-colonial societies, according to the authors, are a unique event in world history. However, the legacy of this experience is not consensual among scholars.

While Adamolekun (2005) argues that, with independence, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa inherited systems of public administration that satisfactorily performed two key functions of a modern state: guaranteeing the continuity of the state and maintaining law and order within territorial areas of each country. For Mkandawire (2010), very early in the post-independence period in Africa, it was clear that the inherited state was inadequate for the development task since the inherited colonial state was, in many parts of Africa, nothing more than a stationary garrison used to protect the trading posts and routes that the imperial order had established.

Despite the divergence in the vision of state capabilities, the authors converge on the idea of the existence of a State. As Adichie (2009) warned, the adoption of any of the points of view, conditions the course of the narrative. For example, for scholars who corroborate Adamolekun (2005), the post-colonial African state will be seen as a “perennial essence”, an organ that was, but tends not to be. Cardoso et al. (2002, p. 17)

explain that the essentialist model of analysis makes useful empirical findings. He describes the political phenomenon in Africa. But this description is synchronous, therefore, the dominant approaches that do not go beyond a description.

Seen as a “perennial essence”, most theoretically created in the image and likeness of the colonizing countries, the description of African states tends to be made in history by analogy (Mamdani, 1996). According to the author, the experiences summarized by analogy were considered historical laggards and were attributed to predestination, and in the case that real-life performance did not correspond to the prescribed trajectory, it was understood as a deviation.

This explains, in part, the proliferation of labels such as “failed states”, “collapsed states” (Call, 2008), “predatory states” (Evans, 1989) among others. For Njoku and Bondarenko (2018, p.4) “contemporary international law is based on the recognition of the nation-state as the basic unit of international relations and world politics. Thus, post-colonial countries simply had no alternative to declaring themselves sovereign nation-states”.

In agreement Mamdani, Bellucci (2010, p. 11) affirms that based on concrete data, the Western State model is used as a reference, to conclude that Africans are unable to manage their State, and, therefore, should be the westerners. Bierschenk and De Sardan, (2014) explain that the representations of the state proposed by philosophers, researchers and social scientists are always rooted to a greater or lesser degree in a particular context that constitutes a kind of latent reference point.

Looking at scholars and the geographic space of the literature production on “failed states”, “collapsed states”, “predator states”, according to Call (2008) these labels flourished at the end of September 11 associated with needs security of the American empire and western states. Mkandawire and Soludo (1998, p.vii) note that great irony in the history of Africa's development is that the theories and models employed come largely from outside the continent. And they point out that no other region in the world has been so dominated by external ideas and models.

However, Mbembe (2001) points out limitations resulting from what he called “African forms of self-registration”. According to the author, the effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could fully acquire its own subjectivity found two forms of historicism that limited him: first, the “economicism” that resorted to Marxist and nationalist categories and the second, that developed from the emphasis on the “native condition” (Mbembe, 2001).

According to Mbembe (2001), the first current of ideas (Marxist and nationalist) is permeated by the tension between voluntarism and victimization and has four main characteristics: (i) Lack of reflexivity and instrumental conception of knowledge and science, in the sense that none of them are recognized as autonomous. (ii) Mechanical and reified view of history. (iii) The desire to destroy tradition and the belief that true identity is conferred by the division of labor that gives rise to social classes, in which the proletariat (rural or urban) has the role of universal class par excellence, and (iv) This body of thoughts rests in an essentially controversial relationship with the world based on rhetorical rituals.

It concludes that, over time, attempts to define African identity simply and clearly have failed because African identity does not exist as an essence, it is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably the practices of the self (Mbembe, 2001).

It is highlighted from above that the limitations of the use of objectivist ontology are reflected in the research of scholars on both sides of the border, those from outside who analyze the African State from a latent reference point (Bierschenk & De Sardan, 2014) and the insiders who confront the tensions presented by Mbembe (2001). The following is an analysis of the State from the subjectivist ontology.

III. THE AFRICAN STATE IN THE LENS OF SUBJECTIVIST ONTOLOGY

Subjectivist ontology according to Cunliffe (2010) sees reality as imagined and as a product of the human mind. The scholars who base on subjectivist ontology, according to the author, assume that humans are autonomous, give meaning to their surroundings, and are creative; that knowledge is personal and experiential. Therefore, research methods need to explore individual understandings and subjective world experiences.

The works *Discourse on colonialism* by Aimé Césaire (1978) and *Invention of Africa* by Valetim Mudimbe (1988) are emblematic in criticizing the colonial narrative about Africa. Mudimbe (1988) explains that concepts widely used in anthropology such as “savages” and “primitives” were created, by prominent social scientists, during the Enlightenment period. And, from that moment on, “several schools of anthropology developed models and techniques to describe the ‘primitive’ according to changing trends in the context of the Western experience” (p.34).

The use of the term “invention” indicates that the object of analysis in Africa rests on individual cognitions and does not have an independent existence. It is, therefore, a

creation. This term was later used by Said (1990) in his book *Orientalism* where the author explains that the Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that gave it reality and presence in and for the West (p. 17).

This invention of subjects as objects of transformation and spaces of intervention may have as one of the main references, the speech of President Harry Truman. According to Banerjee (2003), “the invention of development and the creation of underdevelopment” had its genesis in President Harry Truman's inaugural speech on January 20, 1949, in which he outlined a global program for development. In the spirit of this discourse, in addition to the narcissistic recognition of itself as the prototype, US imperialism was entrusted with the mission of bringing development to the underdeveloped areas of the world.

According to Apata (2019) in the discourse of the invention, Africans are seen as passive heirs of all Western cultural imports, which are assimilated without resistance, however, according to the author, Africans are active agents frequently involved in negotiating their destiny with Western powers.

This view is in line with the subjectivist ontology which, according to (Cardoso et al., 2002), focuses on the analysis of the processes of daily construction of the State, not presenting it as an essence in itself, but a permanent construction subject to attempts at errors, correction, and progress.

In the same line of reasoning, Bierschenk and De Sardan, (2014) state that incompleteness, fragility, and reversibility are universal characteristics of state-building processes. The authors introduce the concept of Statehood, which refers to this unfinished state-building feature.

Under the lens of a subjectivist ontology, the emphasis is placed on the process of knowledge construction that involves the interaction between the subject and object that divides researchers into social constructivists and constructionists. As Cunliffe (2014) explains, the interest of constructivists is the generation of theoretical explanations from practice, and their work is not reflective while social constructionists focus on how meaning or practical theories are created among people in their embodied dialogue and relationally responsive and see themselves as part of the meaning-building process (Ibid, p.483).

Correspondingly, Cardoso et al. (2002) say that constructivism starts from two assumptions: the first consists of the idea that social reality is constituted through the action of individuals, and the second sees in politics a

process that is always in formation, and therefore cannot be an essence perennial (Cardoso et al., 2002, p. 11).

The study carried out by Evans (1989) on models of States and the fruit of which, years later, he defended the thesis of “embedded autonomy” as one of the factors leading to the economic development of East Asian countries, was based on the analysis of the functioning of the bureaucracy that in his view, in East Asian countries, he was already approaching the ideal Weberian model (Evans, 2010).

Consequently, the deficiencies of the bureaucracy in Zaire have led it to be considered a “predatory state”, a term close to the concepts of “failed state”, “fragile state” and “collapsed state”. Ferreira (2014) states that the concept of a fragile state is centered on a concept of state as a normative ideal, not based on the empirical reality of state formation processes in different parts of the world.

According to the author, the dominant conception of a fragile state is a-historical, because it does not consider the different processes of state formation in various regions. It is also presented as static and is not based on the empirical reality that presents various political dynamics, legitimacy, and authorities that unfold at levels other than the central power of the state.

Regarding the approach advocated by Evans (1989, 2010), Bierschenk and De Sardan, (2014) argue that the ideal type of bureaucracy only connotes the “chance of its own existence”. Referring to studies such as that of (Evans, 1989; 2010), they explain that the empirical argument is that there are different degrees of the existence of bureaucracies and states, ranging from the hypothetical extremes of complete absence to complete existence. They conclude that claiming that a particular bureaucracy, say an African bureaucracy, is not in line with Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy, is a sociological banality and would certainly not come as a surprise to Weber himself.

Bierschenk and De Sardan, (2014) suggest that the state should be seen not as an entity, but as a set of practices and processes in a field of complex powers. And these processes can be executed in different directions, with different effects (p.14-15). The authors highlight the always incomplete nature of state formation processes and the “patched” (*bricolé* or *gebastelt*) nature of the “state”, which is its heterogeneity (Ibid, p. 5).

Despite privileging a process of knowledge that is sensitive to the process and gives priority to the autonomy of individuals in the attribution of meanings, in the subjectivist ontology as the objectivist the subject and object are separate entities where “hierarchically” in the research, the subject occupies a superior position about the “objects”. The intersubjectivist ontology, as we shall see

below, levels this inequality between the subject and the object.

IV. THE AFRICAN STATE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERSUBJECTIVIST ONTOLOGY

According to Cunliffe (2010), intersubjectivity emphasizes “we”, interrelated experiences incorporated, and meanings *in situ*. According to the author, the emphasis of intersubjectivism is on “us”, intersubjectivist researchers work in a reflexive hermeneutics, with research participants in conversations to explore how they both interpret, understand, and relate continuously with each other and with what fence. The following shows a possible application in the study of the African State.

With the historical distance of the independence period, the 1960s, current studies (Ayee, 2015; Adamolekun, 2005; Karyeija, 2012) seek to assess the impact of public sector reforms in several African countries, implemented since the 1980s. Despite the difference in arguments, scholars agree that although there is variation in results between and within countries, across areas and sectors, there is still much to be done.

However, two arguments call attention, the first is by Botlhale (2019) who looks at the case of success in Africa. The author questions the Public Sector Reforms in Botswana; *Good Seed but Bad Soil?* And, he argues that the results of public sector reform in the country were modest because when introducing reforms it is necessary to prepare the soil (foundation conditions) before planting the seed (reform).

The same finding was made earlier by Karyeija (2012) when answering about *Public sector reforms in Africa: What lessons have we learned?* According to the author, ten lessons can be extracted from the implemented processes, two of which are: the need to recognize the importance of culture and context, because sometimes local values contradict the content of reform efforts and do things in their order that is, first things first, therefore, a reliable public sector must be created before reforming it.

According to Botlhale (2019, p. 541), before the government launched public sector reforms in the 1990s, it was very necessary to introduce national work ethic and mentality change programs. Based on this statement, made by a scholar from and residing in the country most praised in international literature, one can ask: how does the mentality change? Can you change the mindset of someone who does not feel and does not see the need to change? Who can change the other's mentality?

The author points out that the expression ‘*go lekanya tiro le madi*’ (equating work effort with remuneration) and the cattle post mentality compromise productivity in the

public sector (Botlhale, 2019). Also interesting are the findings that Karyeija (2012) had in his doctoral research, where he observed that performance based on the New Public Management (NPM). The performance evaluation system was less applicable to the civil service of Uganda because the culture seemed incompatible with a system that sought to evaluate individual performance without taking into account the unequal distribution of power, strong collective norms, and fear of innovation or new ways of doing things (p.113).

The “*go lekanya Tiro le madi*” in Botswana makes a proportion of the effort with the salary questioning the conception and value of the work and the salary level. How can you “adjust” this habit? The study carried out on performance evaluation carried out in Uganda by Karyeija (2012) also revealed that there was a difficulty in evaluating an older person by the younger ones. The evaluation is confused with disrespect, lack of consideration, or lack of education even with instruction.

Ncube (2010), Pillay et al. (2013) and Nussbaum, (2003) invite us to look at the core of the African tradition called ubuntu and analyze its influence on African management and leadership styles. Ncube (2010) states that ubuntu forms the nucleus of the most traditional African culture and constitutes an alternative to the western leadership philosophy. In turn, Pillay et al. (2013) explain that, while the West is based on an individualistic and self-service paradigm, ubuntu is rooted in a collectivist perspective expressed in “I am because we are; I can only be a person through others”. Therefore, ubuntu is the ability of African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interest of building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual care (Nussbaum, 2003).

The intersubjectivist ontology overcomes the limitations of the objectivist and subjectivist ontologies because it has more advantages and can capture the essence of the functioning of formal organizations based on the philosophy of life of the respective societies. At one time, Frederickson (2002) comparatively analyzing the bureaucratic morality of Weberianism (West) and Confucianism (East Asia) stated that there are few foundations in Western thought on which the moral justification of bureaucracy can rest and concluded that “Confucius stands for the ethics of bureaucracy, like Weber, is for the structure and behavior of bureaucracy” (p.610).

These conclusions justify the effort that Blunt and Jones (1997) made in their article Exploring the limits of Western leadership theory in East Asia and Africa. The authors’ objective was to critically examine the Western functionalist paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) of

human resource management-transformational leadership - comparing it with the leadership patterns observed in East Asia and Africa. They concluded that current Western notions of leadership are not widely applicable in Africa and East Asia.

“The main reasons have to do with significant differences in values regarding authority, group loyalty and interpersonal harmony. Leadership in the West depends on the follower and the performance and therefore tends to be more participatory. Concern for the well-being of employees masks a primary interest in the performance of the individual and the organization, while in the East the maintenance of harmony and face has deep philosophical and cultural roots, which may override short-term commercial considerations, but (paradoxically, perhaps) still being in the long-term interest (performance) of the organization” (Blunt & Jones 1997, p. 18).

The study by Mailey (2015) affiliated to the Strategic Center for the Study of Africa based in the United States entitled *Anatomy of the resource curse: predatory investment in the extractive industry in Africa*, follows a similar line of reasoning revealing the emergence of a new model of business between Asians (in the study the Queensway group) and several African state leaders whose “secret” is “first make friends and then do business”. This business approach differs from the idea of the market as a neutral space in which unknown actors with no previous connection offer or buy goods and services, the so-called “free market”. Therefore, this case shows that objectively there is no free market for human relations at least, inspired by trust and perspectives of reciprocity.

As we mentioned above, under the lens of objectivist ontology, the post-colonial African State tends to be seen as a perennial essence, “an organ that was, but that tends not to be”. In a different sense, the subjectivist ontology defended by Bierschenk and De Sardan, (2014) looks at a state as a reality under construction. In other words, while objectivist ontology anchored to a normative approach to the State based on national and international legal norms, it conceives the State as a fully realized object that, in certain regions, tends to show pathologies or even die (example from Somalia), ontology subjectivist is more sensitive to the process and considers the incompleteness of the formation of the State characterized by advances and setbacks, trials and errors.

However, the common denominator of these ontologies (objectivist and subjectivist) lies in the separation of the subject and object. The first being the one that best understands the phenomenon in question and the second, an instrument of analysis, passive and manipulable.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF USING INTERSUBJECTIVE ONTOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF THE STATE IN AFRICA

a) It can be recognized, as (Frederickson, 2002; Blunt & Jones, 1997) observe that there is a cultural tradition, management style and leadership based on *ubuntu* philosophy;

b) Although *ubuntu* is not widely disseminated, and is studied even in african academies, it is nevertheless constitutive of the way of being of communities and reflected in individual behavior. The case of “*go lekanya Tiro le madi*” in Botswana and NPM, the challenges of the performance evaluation system in the civil service of Uganda due to collective norms or the perception of seniority as an official post in Mozambique, are examples of the influence of social norms in the functioning of bureaucracy;

c) Africans, like other people, are not subjects who passively appropriate innovations and “solutions” coming from outside their context (Apata, 2019). The solutions are subject to evaluations and contextualization and can be modified, interrupted or simply rejected. In this light, one might, for example, question whether it is the state that has failed, or collapsed, or are the programs for structural readjustment and public sector reform preached by donors and creditors;

d) The intersubjectivity, although aiming at the construction of scientific knowledge, is more sensitive to other types of knowledge subordinated to colonization, which is positive for post-colonial societies with low levels of formal education, but centered on norms and social values;

e) Intersubjectivism allows the subjects involved in the research to learn from each other, that is, learning between equals which minimizes the risk of creating a greater collection of systematized knowledge about the studied communities outside their context, a situation visible before and in the early years of political independence;

f) Finally, intersubjective ontology is more apt to counter the tendency to narrate Africa from the point of view of what it is not (Mbembe, 2015) for what it effectively is.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this qualitative essay, it was shown that the adoption of an ontology influences our view of the reality under study. In this case, different ontologies led to the construction of different images about African State, whether as “something that was but tends not to be” And for that reason, failed or collapsed or, on the other hand, a state under construction subject to advances and setbacks, trial and error. It was argued that the images produced are

anchored to the dominant objectivist and subjectivist ontologies in the 70s and 80s, which applied in the analysis of African State have been shown to be very limited. It is suggested, therefore, the adoption of intersubjectivist ontology that, privileging the joint construction of meanings and knowledge, is more apt to capture the organizational dynamics that have been influenced by *ubuntu* (“I am because we are; I can only be one person through others”) considered the African philosophy of life, management, and leadership. In short, can the Bantu people speak (too)?

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