
On Early States – Structure, Development, and Fall

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ABSTRACT

After some remarks on early theorists of the state a survey is presented of recent views on the state. As a point of departure is taken Radcliffe-Brown's statement that the state is 'a collection of individual social beings connected by a complex system of relations'. Following this view the state will be considered here as a specific type of sociopolitical organization. After discussing its three basic components (number of people, territory, and type of government) several types of state are distinguished of which the first type, the Early State is the subject of the article. On the basis of extensive comparisons general characteristics of the Early State are established, and with the help of these three types of Early States are constructed, the inchoate (incipient), the typical and the transitional one. In all cases Early States are governed by a sacred ruler, whose legitimacy is based on a kind of (asymmetrical) reciprocity between ruler and people. This makes legitimacy and ideology central issues in Early State studies.

The Early State evolves generally from simpler types of sociopolitical organization, such as e.g., chiefdoms or large bigmen systems. To make this evolution possible a complex interplay of a number of factors is needed, varying from population growth, the production of a surplus and an ideology which explains and justifies the increasing division of power. Moreover some incentive seems necessary to trigger the developments.

Interestingly stratification as well as the development of more complex types of sociopolitical organization sometimes occurs quite unnoticed and unintended as examples from Lake Victoria,

the Kachin, and the Betsileo demonstrate. It seems possible to analyze the evolution of sociopolitical organization with the help of the Complex Interaction Model in which the various factors mentioned play a role. War is considered here as being a derivative of problems in the factors mentioned, rather than a necessary or sufficient factor.

There are reasons to think of specific regional features in the development of Early States. The evolution of Early States in Africa involved features differing from those in Polynesia or the Americas. These differences were found mainly in the ideological sphere.

The Early State is no more. Some declined and collapsed because of internal weaknesses; others were subjected by the Great Powers when colonizing the world in the 17th till the 19th centuries and some Early States reached the level of Developed, and even of Mature States in the course of time by themselves.

The dominant position of the State in the present world should not blind us for the fact that all over the world still numerous people live in tribal organizations, irrespective of the fact of whether they are still independent or incorporated into some state. On the other hand, there are nowadays several states that can be considered as Failed States, not able to run their own business. Other states are now members of ever and ever growing international organizations. The question is thus justified in the end: has the State still a future?

1. THE STATE; GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Already for quite some time scholars have studied the state (for a recent overview: Kradin 2009). Among them are philosophers, historians, sociologists and anthropologists. We may go as far back as to Confucius and Lao Tze, or to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (van der Vliet 2005), and if we want to stay closer to our time there is the Italian political scientist Machiavelli, who wrote in the 16th century *Il Principe* (The Prince), or the British scholar Hobbes, who in the 17th century justified the existence of monarchy in his *Leviathan*. In France Rousseau wrote in 1762 his essay *Du contrat social*. Yet, interesting though their views are, their works have all in common that their data were extremely limited. They mainly theorized from a self-conceived past to a wished-

for future, or tried to explain only half-known phenomena with data that were totally inadequate for that purpose (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 6). Moreover, usually these philosophers considered the state as either good or bad – views that deeply colored their views. For the beginning of empirical analyses of the origin, the character and the early development of the state one must look back to a not too distant past. The first thorough discussion of the state and its origins is found in Friedrich Engels, who based his work on historical and anthropological data. In 1884 he published *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, in which he on the one hand summarized Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), and on the other added supplementary information based mainly on the works of Marx. Engels here defended the view that the state came into being when the necessity arose to protect developing private property. This view was the result of Engels' concentrating mainly on what he conceived of as the optimum, *i.e.*, the development of Ancient Greece and Rome. He also referred to the Germans, the Iroquois Indians and to ethnological examples from all over the world (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 6–7). In an earlier work, *Anti-Dühring* (1877/78), however, he discussed another possible way in which a class society and the state might have developed. Here he suggested a gradual change of 'functional' power into 'exploitative' power. With this he meant that a leader who manages the affairs of his society well gradually gets a stronger position, and in the course of time people becomes completely dependent of his leadership. Because of this his position changes gradually from servant of the community into its master. The essence of the state, in Engels' views, was in both cases the suppression of a lower class by an upper class. These two groups, or social classes, were inevitably antagonistic. In Engels' view this contradiction was insoluble, and thus there should be developed a political apparatus to maintain some form of peace and to guarantee the lasting supremacy of the dominant class. This would be a power, apparently standing above society, but actually serving the interests of the upper class – this apparatus was the state (Engels 1964 [1884]; Claessen and Skalník 1978: 8). It is clear that in Engels' eyes the state was not 'good', but inevitable.

To what extent Engels presents a correct explanation of the origin of the state, and to what extent the proposed mechanisms are

valid is open to discussion. One of his observations is certainly true: the state is not from all times and all places. At a certain moment in time – or actually at several moments and at various places – the state came into being. Engels predicted moreover that once, when the conditions that gave rise to the state disappear, also the state will disappear, a view that finds confirmation in a recent article by Peter Kloos (1995).

It seems reasonable to assume that the state – wherever and whenever it arose – did not enter history already in its fully developed form. It seems more probable that in the course of time from lesser developed socio-political forms, such as chiefdoms or big-man societies, more complex types of government emerged gradually of which a number can be considered as beginning, or **early states**, that is socio-political formations which, though certainly having a number of characteristics of the state, cannot yet qualify as full-grown, or **mature states**.

Formulated in the simplest terms a state may be viewed as **a specific type of organization** namely a sociopolitical organization. This is a crucial statement. The state as a product of social relations must not be reified, personified or sacralized.

‘It is a collection of individual social beings connected by a complex system of relations. Within that organization different individuals have different roles, and some are in possession of special power or authority’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xiii).

Recently Donald Kurtz (2006), following this view, discarded the view of an ‘anthropomorphized state’, and stressed the fact that it is people, who do and think and have interests. Following these leads, we thus cannot say ‘the state thinks’, or ‘the state wants’, or ‘it is in the interest of the state’ etc. It is people – the leaders – who think, want, or have interests. Sometimes leaders act in what they consider as the interest of the people; sometimes they act in what they conceive as the will of their God, and sometimes they act, brutally or carefully disguised, only in their own interests. But, usually they justify their activities by stating loudly that they act in the ‘interest’ of the state.

The state, however, is an abstraction, a way of speaking, a kind of shorthand indicating a complex phenomenon. For the state is a certain type of organization, comprising three main components: *a number of people, a certain delimited territory, and a specific*

type of government. However correct though this may be, this characterization is too broad to be useful, because it applies to any polity, including stateless societies. To be of use, therefore the three components have to be elaborated.

Regarding the *number of people* it is difficult to indicate the minimum number of people necessary to make the existence of a state possible. On the basis of the estimated numbers of people in some small early states on Tahiti in Polynesia in the eighteenth century, one might advance that some 5.000 people is required to make a state organization possible. A population of such a size seems minimally required to recruit the necessary number of functionaries, specialists and servants to enable a centralized government to function and to have at its disposal a sufficient number of people to produce food and goods to enable the upper group to live in luxury (Claessen 1978, 1988b; 2000: 158). It must be emphasized, however, that there exist many stateless societies with larger numbers of people than many small states (for Indonesia: Slamet-Velsink 1995; for Central Africa: Vansina 1991). To this should be added that recent research indicated that the number of inhabitants per km² of arable land (under similar technological conditions) poses limits to growth (Claessen and van Bakel 2006, table on p. 254).

The concept of *territory* is equally vague. In most cases the rule over a particular territory is closely related to the rule over the people living in it, rather than being connected with the number of square kilometers (cf. Tymowski 2005). To the component territory therefore should be added that it means government over people having residence in that territory.

The most important component to identify a polity as a state is the type of *government*. Even a superficial perusal of the views of a number of scholars shows convincingly that the type of government is the key feature of a state; the number of people and the size of territory are not decisive – though, it goes without saying, a state cannot exist without people or a territory. The component of government can be analyzed under two different aspects: *power*, and *administration*.

Power is in principle the capacity to influence decisively the behavioral alternatives of someone else (Weber 1964 [1922]; see also Kurtz 2006 on power). This can be achieved in various ways:

by moral persuasion, by threats, by physical force, by control of the sources of livelihood, or by giving the other person the feeling that the wishes or laws of the central authority are in conformity with his own norms and values. Power, thus is a broad concept, varying between the extremes of *coercion* and *consensus*. Naturally a government will strive to get as much consensus as possible, for working with people agreeing with the measures taken is easier and more efficient than having to enforce and control people who are against the rules issued. The inefficiency and poor results of slave labor or compulsory labor make this sufficiently clear. When people agree with the existing division of power, and thus with the laws and rules issued by the rulers, the government is considered *legitimate* – a blessed situation that in actual practice is never reached completely. There will always be individuals or groups with different ideologies or interests, which cannot – or will not – accept the rules and regulations of the government and thus have to be forced to do so. They may be called the ‘antis’.

Administration is the management of state affairs and this task is entrusted to the executive apparatus of the government. Such an apparatus can be limited to a few functionaries, but can also take the form of a complete bureaucracy in the sense of Weber (Weber 1964; cf. Bondarenko 2005, 2006). An administrative apparatus usually takes the form of a hierarchy of officials, the top functionaries of which are concentrated in the governmental center. Ideally the apparatus serves the aims of the decision makers (examples of such apparatuses in Claessen 1987).

What do these data learn us about the character of the state? In the first place the state is a socio-political organization that monopolizes the control of power. This power is embodied in the central ruler. The organization occupies a territory and in its center those in power reside; it is a **centralized** political organization. The leader, or more broadly speaking, the government in the political center, issues laws and regulations and has the legitimized power to maintain these laws through the use of both authority and force, or the threat of force. The central ruler also has the duty to prevent fission; he has to keep the state together. It will be clear, that both obligations represent the ideal situation; in actual practice a ruler never succeeds to completely maintain law and order, and neither to always keep the state together.

As a preliminary definition it can be said that: The state, thus, is an organization for the regulation of social relations in a society that is divided into at least two social classes, the rulers and the ruled.

2. THE CONCEPT OF THE EARLY STATE

This here seems the place to distinguish the *early state* from the more developed types of state, the *mature state*, the *capitalist state*, the *modern state* – or what other term one wants to apply. The fact that many scholars have considerable difficulty in drawing on the one hand the dividing-line between the non-state and the early state, and on the other – the line between the early state and the mature state is usually the result of their failure to understand that such transformations were not abrupt mechanical ones, but on the contrary, were often extremely lengthy, difficult processes. A good illustration of such a process is given by Fredrik Barth, in his report on the repeated shifts towards a state organization and back to the chiefdom again in Swat (Pakistan) (1985). An additional difficulty is that several social forms continue their existence long after the moment that a non-state (chiefdom, big-man society *etc.*) has become an early state, or an early state has become a mature one. In early states one may find for quite some time influential local communities, clans and lineages, and communal land. In the mature state powerful noble families may retain for a considerable period of time political or ritual functions. The socio-political forms in between the non-state and the mature state are called **early states**.

When constructing types, categories, periods, and so on, we should be aware that they are **our constructions**. Any meaning infused into the particular categories flows from the theoretical framework behind the construction, not from the data. The distinctive criteria used for classification are analytical tools that are related to specific theoretical views and research premises and are not inherent in the phenomena studied. Early states, thus, are our constructions and our views (Claessen and van de Velde 1987: 3).

Only on the basis of thorough **comparative research** is it possible to identify such sociopolitical forms and to identify their characteristics – or rather: to construct these forms with a reasonable degree of trustworthiness. I came to this conclusion when,

long ago, I was working at the preparation of my PhD thesis which I presented at Amsterdam University in 1970, under the title (translated) *Of Princes and Peoples*. In this work I investigated the political organization of five princedoms (now called early states): Tahiti and Tonga in Polynesia, Dahomey and Buganda in Africa, and the state of the Incas. After giving first detailed descriptions of the five early states I then compared their political organization on no less than 241 aspects, arranged to three key subjects, the ruler, the notables, and the common people. All aspects which could be given either a positive (present) or a negative (absent) assessment four or more times were designated as 'general'. No less than 158 aspects of the political organization could be qualified as such. These general aspects were found mainly in categories as 'the functions of the ruler', 'the ruler's relatives', 'court and courtiers', 'position of regional administrators', 'position of local administrators', 'stratification of the population', 'obligatory services', and 'ritual and ceremonial obligations'. Categories with low 'general aspect' scores were: 'rules of succession for the ruler', 'position of the heir to the throne', 'position of military leaders', 'taxation system', 'rights of the common people'. Great variation was also found in aspects such as: 'sacred aspects of the ruler', 'inauguration of the ruler', 'women around the ruler', and 'position of the ministers'.

The fact that there were found many similarities in aspects as functions and duties of the rulers, the functions and positions of the regional and local administrators, the internal stratification of the population and the compulsory services meant that the basic aspects of the political structure were similar in all cases. Considerable variation was found in the categories where clearly a wide scope of variation was possible, without harming the political structure.

The findings in *Of Princes and Peoples* formed the point of departure for the much larger research in early states, published in 1978 in *The Early State* which I edited with Peter Skalnik from Czechoslovakia. In this volume we brought together twenty-one case studies of early states, each written by an expert in the field. After four introductory chapters in which various aspects of research on the state and the early state were presented and a number of hypotheses were formulated, the descriptive chapters followed.

Here early states such as Angkor, Egypt, France, Hawai'i, Incas, Kuba, Scythians, Tahiti, Volta, and Yoruba were presented. In the third part of the volume we presented the comparisons and conclusions. We could establish that the early state was not to be connected with a certain period or region. Among the oldest belong Ancient Egypt, and Ancient China, and among the most recent are African cases such as Kuba and the Voltaic states.

In arranging the comparative chapters we soon realized that, in comparison with *Of Princes and Peoples*, we were to reduce the number of comparisons considerably, for if we had followed the earlier approach, we would have had to cope with over 20.000 items, which was too much to handle. So we reduced the number of categories to 20, which limited the number of items to about 166. For each of these items we checked each of the 21 cases. This led to about 3.500 indications. Among the categories we discerned were 'territory', 'urbanization', 'the means of subsistence', 'social stratification', 'the ideological basis: sacrality and ritual', 'regulations and laws', 'the benevolent lord', 'inequality', 'the lower stratum', 'types of functionaries', and so on. Following the views of the earlier report, we also indicated Structural Characteristics. To qualify as such an item had to be present in at least sixteen cases, and absent in no more than two, while in the remaining three cases it came under the heading 'no data'. No less than 51 of the 162 items qualified as 'structural', which is about one third. The getting of a score of 16 or more positive identifications in a sample of 21 cases indicates a high probability of being relevant (on the statistical relevance of the Early State sample: Bondarenko and Korotayev 2003). It should be noted here that Leonid Grinin in a recent article stated that in his approach, using different definitions, neither Tahiti, nor Hawai'i should be considered as early states but as small early state analogues (2009: 109).

After a careful consideration of our findings we made a classification of early states. The first category, the simplest form, we called the *inchoate early state*. Later we realized that the term 'incipient early state' would have been better, but then it was too late to change it. Further we distinguished the *typical early state* and as the most developed form we referred to the *transitional early state* (Claessen and Skalnik 1978: 640–641).

As characteristics for the inchoate early state we selected the following traits:

- trade and markets were of only limited importance;
- succession to offices was predominantly hereditary;
- private ownership of land was found exceptionally, while communal ownership was dominant;
- functionaries only received remunerations (often in kind);
- the judicial system did not have codification of laws and punishments;
- taxes consisted for the greater part of obligatory gifts and occasional labor for the state.

An early state was judged to be typical if:

- trade and markets were developed at the supra-local level;
- heredity as a principle of succession was balanced by appointment;
- private ownership of land was still limited, while state ownership was gradually becoming important;
- salaried functionaries were found besides remunerated functionaries;
- a start towards codification of laws and punishments was found;
- regular taxes, partly in kind and partly in services, was exacted, and major works, organized by government functionaries, were undertaken often with the aid of compulsory labor.

An early state was judged to be transitional where:

- trade and markets were of great importance;
- appointment of functionaries was dominant;
- private ownership of land was becoming of increased importance;
- salaried functionaries were in the majority, and the governmental apparatus was gradually becoming a relatively independent political force;
- the codification of laws and punishments had been completed; formal judges were entrusted with the administration of justice;
- taxation had developed into a well-defined system.

Details and characteristics of developed and mature states are presented in paragraph 10.

From our research it appeared that early states, their often rudimentary administrative organization notwithstanding, were often rather stable organizations (see for stability paragraph 9). Many of them existed for hundreds of years. How did they succeed in doing this? It is too easy to look for an explanation in terms of power and enforcement. Coercion and suppression are not the most efficient ways to govern a population – as was remarked already above. There are, of course, exceptions. The Sudanic early state of Bornu is a case in point. Its ethnographer Ronald Cohen (1991) describes in horrid detail the harsh handling and pitiless exploitation of the population by members of the ruling class. Forms of coercion and inequality are found everywhere as Bruce Triggler (1985) holds. Yet such traits were not the dominant characteristics of early state societies. In the majority of cases it is consensus and agreement that dominate the relations between ruler and ruled, a point also brought to the fore by Maurice Godelier (1978). This is connected with the fact that in these cases the ruler is considered as **legitimate**. The concept of legitimation was introduced into the social sciences by Max Weber (1964: 24ff.), who stated that legitimacy was based on the beliefs of the people. If a ruler acted conform the beliefs of his people, he acted in a legitimate way. This formulation is no longer considered sufficient (Beetham 1991: 11). Though a sharing of norms and values by rulers and ruled is a necessary condition, the legal validity of the acquisition and exercise of power also has to be established: did the ruler succeed in the correct, lawful way? And there should be found some evidence of consent derived from actions expressing it (*Ibid.*: 12ff.). Another way of approaching legitimacy is advocated by Donald Kurtz (1984), who states that as long as a government succeeds in fulfilling the – economic – needs of the ruled, there will be found acceptance of, and support for, the rules and regulations issued by the government. It is a rather pragmatic way of defining legitimacy, but it has the advantage of expressing how people generally think about a governmental system: a government has obligations towards its subjects. It is based on a notion of *reciprocity*: we, the people pay and work for you, and you – the ruler, the government – has to take care of us. Both approaches are in line with each other. The idea of reciprocity belongs to the norms and values of the society. When the ruler lives up to the expectations, he will be considered as the rightful overlord. There are several obligations a ruler has to fulfill in this connection. Among

these are: protection, benevolence, and supernatural aid. The ruler should protect his people against its enemies; he is the most important military leader. This view holds, even when as in some African cases, the ruler stays at home when actual combat starts. This is to prevent his sacred person being exposed to the perils of war. A substitute then leads the army (Claessen 1981, 1986). Apart from his military activities, it is the ruler who embodies law and order and also in this way he protects – or tries to protect – his people, in this case against criminals, malefactors and exploitation.

Regarding benevolence, the ruler is, ideologically, the giver, the open handed lord. There should be reciprocity between the ruler and his people. Usually his benevolence is based on some form of redistribution. This means that the center first brings goods together and then distributes them. As, however, the greater part of the goods is consumed in the center, there is only a limited part that can be redistributed. But any gift from such an exalted person, however paltry, is considered to be of the highest value; his gifts have often more a symbolic value than that they are really valuable. Yet, the reciprocal obligations of the ruler have to be taken seriously. In the Marquesas Islands, and Easter Island, where the ruler could not fulfill the expectations of procuring fertility and well-being this occasioned after some time a kind of revolution during which the ruler was deposed (van Bakel 1989; Claessen and van Bakel 2006: 239, 248). A similar development in the Old Kingdom of Egypt is presented by Ellen Morris (2006: 60), who connects the fall of the Old Kingdom with ecological disasters, such as prolonged draught, which occasioned hunger and unrest. The sacred king thus could not fulfill his obligations towards his people any longer, and lost his throne. Renée Hagesteijn (1987) relates how the sacred kings of Angkor who no longer could finance their obligations to the Buddhist temples, lost their legitimacy and thus their position.

In both royal obligations mentioned above, protection and benevolence, one finds clear references to supernatural aspects. The ruler is considered a sacred person, an exalted person. Indeed, a basic characteristic of the sovereign in early states is his sacred status (Claessen 1970, 1978, 1986). This does not mean that he is a god on earth as is still held by some. In the great majority of cases the sacred king is considered to be descended of the gods, as

‘demonstrated’ by long and intricate genealogies (Claessen 1970, 1978, 1986). Because of this he is the intermediary par excellence between gods and men. This implies that amongst other obligations he is supposed to guarantee fertility of women, cattle and soil, and there exists a wide variety of rituals to attain this end. In Tahiti the ruler, the *ari’i rahi*, offers the first fruits to the gods. In the eighteenth century he offered with this purpose even human sacrifices to the god Oro. The Tonga Islands knew the *inasi* festival, during which representatives of all communities handed over the first fruits to the *tui tonga*, who presented them ceremonially to his divine forebears. In West African Dahomey the ruler takes care of the annual offerings of first fruits and in East African Buganda the *kabaka* is regularly ‘advised’ by his divine forebears how to promote fertility in his country. To ensure a good harvest the *sapa inca* ritually ploughs a field every year. The rulers of the early states of the Maya regularly offered their own blood to the gods and, weakened by the loss of blood, they formulated cryptic prophecies regarding the well-being of their people. To strengthen these offerings, the royal consort sometimes shared the blood letting of her husband, and added her blood to his. The Chinese emperors yearly prayed and sacrificed animals to the Heaven in the Temple of Heaven to ensure good crops.

When the ruler of an early state is converted to one of the monotheistic religions – Christianity or Islam – his sacred position creates a problem, for he cannot be a descendant of the gods and at the same time adhere to such an a religion. This problem arose, for example, when in medieval France the Carolingian dynasty replaced the dynasty of the Merovingians, who possessed a traditional sacral legitimacy. The Carolingians sought to compensate for the loss of sacredness in elaborated ecclesiastical rituals, culminating in anointment and coronation, demonstrating that they had the support of the Church – and thus from God. In this way, within the confines of Christianity, the Carolingians mustered the best possible supernatural support for their claims to legitimacy (Claessen 1985).

Summarizing our findings, we now can define the early state as
 A three tier (national, regional, local level) centralized
 socio-political organization for the regulation of social re-

lations in a complex, stratified society divided into at least two basic strata, or emergent social classes – the rulers and the ruled – whose relations are characterized by political dominance of the former and the obligation to pay taxes of the latter, legitimized by a common ideology of which reciprocity is the basic principle (Claessen and Skalnik 1978: 640, slightly adapted).

It should be noted that the term ‘common ideology’ in the definition does not mean that the upper and the lower stratum shared an identical ideology, only that there existed a sufficient amount of overlap between the two to make mutual understanding possible. With regard to ‘reciprocity’ it will be clear that this relation was asymmetrical. The commoners paid in goods and services, and the ruler paid back in protection, law, order, fertility and sometimes some gifts; an exchange of goods for Good.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF THE STATE

When talking about the emergence of states it will obviously be about the emergence of a certain type of socio-political organization, which can be called the *early state*, for all more developed forms of the state were successors of earlier ones. This paragraph will thus concentrate on the development of early states – and, as early states were not foundlings without parents, there will of needs be given also some attention to the socio-political formations that preceded them.

Early states are structurally different from political forms as chiefdoms or big men systems. As they are structurally different from earlier (or other) forms, we can consider the transformation from the one into the other as evolutionary. **Evolution** is defined here as *the process of structural change* (Claessen 2000: 4). The usual addition of ‘development towards growing complexity’ has been left aside in this definition, for there have been many structural changes not leading to more complexity; for example, a society remains on the same general level of complexity but each of its sub groups develops a different political structure, a situation described by Jean-Claude Muller in his analysis of four West African cases (Muller 1985). This observation holds also for countries where, as a consequence of elections, another political party becomes dominant. There will change a lot in that society, but its

overall social and technological structure will remain the same. This definition also makes it possible to include under the heading of evolution cyclical processes, such as those that took place in medieval France, where several royal dynasties followed each other, each time creating a new period of florescence after a time of decline (see paragraph 10). Decline and fall occur in evolution as often as growth and flourishing (Claessen 2000: 63–72). This approach reflects Darwin's original observation that evolution has no special direction; there is no question of any finality (Darwin 1995 [1872]: 98; Claessen 2000: 13, 63ff.). When do we speak of 'structural change'? Structural changes are those that influence – in the course of time – all, or most, aspects of a culture (structure, or society). This explains why evolutionary changes often are slow and at times hardly noticeable. Only after a longer period of time it can be established that, for example, a certain society no longer belongs to the level of the chiefdom, but has reached the level of an early state.

This brings us to the question of how come such evolutionary changes about? How are they triggered? Which are the conditions that start such processes? In this connection I mention some conclusions of *The Early State*. The comparative analysis of twenty one cases showed 'that the development into statehood, in all cases, was triggered off by some action or event which took place a long time before, and was *not directed especially* towards this goal. The other obvious characteristic of the development to statehood is that it always shows something of a snowball effect: once it comes into motion, it grows faster and faster. This is a consequence of *mutual reinforcement* in all of the developmental processes studied between the phenomena and their effects. Thus we can speak of a *positive feedback*' (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 624 – italics in original).

It goes without saying that when the mutual reinforcement does not take place – a case of *negative feedback* – the development towards statehood will not take place.

We established in *The Early State* also (1978: 625) that a limited number of factors played a critical role in the development of early states. In the actual historical process the order in which these

factors played a role varied, while not all factors necessarily always occurred. These factors were:

- Population growth and population pressure;
- War, the threat of war or conquest, raids;
- Progress in production and the promotion of a surplus;
- Ideology and legitimation;
- Influence of already existing states.

To these can be added as conditions:

- The presence of social stratification;
- The presence of a certain territory.

To give an indication of the way in which the factors may influence each other I will describe some possible developments called up by the factor population growth. In our research it was found that a minimum of at least some five thousand people was needed to make a state organization possible. The number of people is rather dynamic, and population growth, when people stay together, makes additional administrative measures necessary. Larger groups of people makes more elaborate types of government necessary, as was demonstrated by Gregory Johnson (1982), who also pointed to the fact that the availability of large masses of information asks for leaders who can handle such masses (1978). If such a more developed type of government, and more competent types of leaders do not emerge, the group will fall apart in a number of separate units, each under simpler types of leadership. Population growth may lead to population pressure, which may stimulate raids to obtain food, or to effect the payment of tribute by some population group living outside the territory to supplement production shortages within it, as was the case *e.g.*, with the Aztecs. This usually involves war, or the threat of war, which in its turn stimulates the emergence of stronger leaders and a better organization, and so on. Alternatively, it may stimulate production which (as in the case of medieval France) may in the end bring about affluence, which enables the development of a complex state apparatus – which in its turn, will stimulate increased production.

Among the most influential theories on the origin of the state belongs Robert Carneiro's circumscription theory (1970), which deals with a population which is increasing in size and lives in a limited (circumscribed) area blessed with resources. The growing number of people forces a struggle (war) for existence and the defeated groups are faced with the choice of accepting subjugation

(and exploitation) or heading off into the desert. The organization which the victors develop to keep the defeated groups in subjugation he calls the state. Though there are cases in which Carneiro's theory holds, this approach does not explain state formation in all cases (for a detailed discussion of Carneiro's theory, see Claessen 2006: 219ff.; more comments in Roscoe and Graber 1988).

There have been formulated more theories aiming at an explanation of the origin of the state. To the views of Friedrich Engels was referred already in section 1. The German sociologist Franz Oppenheimer proposed some years later, in 1909, the conquest theory, which also held that the state was an instrument of oppression, in this case occasioned by pastoral peoples subjecting peasant societies. It goes without saying that also this theory cannot be considered as a general explanation for the origin of the state. The same holds for Karl A. Wittfogel's irrigation theory (1957), which connects the formation of the state with the development of (large) irrigation works (cf. Claessen 1973). Recently Leonid Grinin presented a detailed analysis of the origin of more complex socio-political formations (2009).

4. UNINTENDED BEGINNINGS: LAKE VICTORIA, THE KACHIN

Some of the factors listed in section 3 have played a role in social organization since time immemorial. The awareness that a sufficient number of people, a supporting ideology, some form of production, a certain territory, and a rudimentary socio-political organization are essential for the continuity of a society goes back to the beginning of mankind; perhaps even the Neanderthals were already aware of them (cf. Roebroeks 2000, 2004). The role of these factors remained, however, for quite some time at a low level of development. Only after a very long period of time, when climatic changes made food production possible and large groups of people started to live together, they became relevant (cf. Cook 2003). This is especially the case with regard to the origin and development of early states. Social stratification did emerge only when mankind had increased considerably. Sometimes even practically unnoticed by the people concerned, as is described by Conrad Kottak (1972). He tells how, in a distant past – some 3.000 years ago – a limited number of people lived at the shores of Lake Victoria in East Africa. The climate here is good, the land fertile, and the lake provides water, fish, and possibilities for trade. Un-

der such favorable conditions population increased and as time passed the whole shore of the lake became inhabited. The unabated population growth forced the societies involved to look for more areas of settlement and found these in the hinterland. There have not been found indications for war or conquest – as Carneiro's well-known circumscription theory (1970) prescribes – developments were peaceful. Those who went to the hinterland were mostly younger sons of younger sons and their dependants. They were certainly not banished to a wilderness; the land there was also fertile, and the climate was good. Their only disadvantage was that they had no direct access to the lake any longer – and consequently not to the fish and the trade. If they were able to share in any of the benefits offered by the lake, they were dependent on the generosity of the dwellers of the lake shore – their older brothers, uncles, and cousins. In this way a situation had developed in which not everybody of the same age and the same sex had equal access to the means of livelihood. That is: there had developed what Fried (1967: 186) defined as a **stratified society**. Kottak's model reveals how virtually without a ripple a society can glide in a situation in which terms like 'rank' and 'stratified' are applicable. Many centuries later a number of early states emerged around Lake Victoria, of which Buganda was the most prominent. The development of these states is connected with the arrival of groups of cattle holders from the northeast, which led to many changes in the region. The newcomers subjected several of the clans living here, while others, especially those living near to the lake retained some independence. Their chiefs retained important ritual functions on which the later rulers of Buganda depended for legitimation. There are no indications that these rituals were especially connected with fertility – as is the case in many African chiefdoms and early states – but rather with influencing prosperity (Ray 1991: 8, 12). I will return to the matter of fertility in paragraph 6, but first I will describe another society in which – also in a peaceful way and unintended – a complex, stratified society emerged to show that there is no necessary relation between the emergence of stratification and war, as suggested by the theories mentioned above.

The developments in question took place with the Kachin, who live in Highland Burma (Leach 1954; Friedman 1979). The Kachin had, and still have, an economy in which shifting cultivation is the principal means of livelihood. They live in more or less egalitarian villages the inhabitants of which are organized in large family

groups. These families were related to each other by a complex circulating marriage structure in which the brides went into one direction and the bride prices into the other. So family A gives their daughters in marriage to the family B, and the family B pays bride prices to A. The family B gives their daughters in marriage to the family C, and receives the bride prices from C – and so on, so that in the end the family A gets their brides from the family E, and pays the bride prices to them. Under the prevailing ideology the giver has a higher prestige than the receiver, but as each family was giver as well as receiver at the same time, the egalitarian structure remained in tact. The only possible source of disturbance of this balanced situation was the agricultural system. Generally speaking the small plots did not give a high yield, but every so often there were abundant crops to be harvested. At that particular moment the owners of that field had a considerable surplus and because the crop could not be stored, it was custom to organize a feast for all the villagers. The host of the feast – the giver – derived great prestige from his action. However, as every so often each family is in the position of giving such a feast, this causes little structural change. But it might just so happen that one of the families was able to give several feasts one after the other. This does affect the egalitarian structure and the fortunate family accrues a more permanent prestige to itself. As a consequence the daughters of the prestigious family become more expensive and the higher bride prices increase its prosperity – and thus the prestige of the already rich family – even more. If this trend continues the girls become too expensive for the boys of the village. They then construct of needs a new marriage circuit and the prosperous family has to find another bride exchange circuit in which the notables – the rich – of a wider area participate. Quite often here the story of prosperity ends: the once rich fields loose their fertility, the crops become less, and the prestige of the once notable dwindles down and the former egalitarian structure is restored. If, however, the prosperity of the family continues, the less fortunate villagers seek an explanation for these uncommon developments. This explanation is found in religious terms: the fortunate fellow-villagers apparently have a better access to the ancestors or the spirits than ordinary mortals. Now the developments reach a crucial phase. Up to that point the position of the notable family had been based on distribution: the giving of feasts and the handing out of gifts. But once

the villagers understand how matters really stand, the stream of gifts changes direction. The villagers begin to offer the well-to-do family small gifts with the request that they put in a good word for them with their ancestors. Naturally this request is acceded to and within the shortest possible time **material goods** flow in to the notable and he reciprocates this with **immaterial matters** – a veritable realization of Marx' Asiatic mode of production (Claessen 2000: 60; cf. Friedman 1979), and the head of the notable family becomes a kind of hereditary leader: a chief. After some time the initially voluntary gifts become obligatory; they change from presents to taxation. When some villagers refuse to pay pressure will be exerted, and eventually armed retainers of the lord will punish them and rob their possessions. The 'servant of the people' has definitely changed into the 'master' of the people – a development predicted by Engels long ago (Engels 1960 [1877/78]).

This is not the end of the story, however. This type of development was not limited to the Kachin. The same occurred in many parts of Southeast Asia. Some of the prosperous village leaders extended their influence to neighboring villages, where the poor farmers also became convinced of his supernatural relations and presented small gifts to the prosperous leader. Also here after some time the voluntary gifts were replaced by a system of taxation. The consequence of this development in the end was the emergence of a number of rather stable chiefdoms (or *muangs*) in the area. Some of the chiefs then tried to bring a number of such *muangs* under their sway. These processes are described in detail by Renée Hagesteijn in *Circles of Kings* (1989). As the mountainous terrain made effectual war and conquest practically impossible; these factors hardly played a role of importance here. Ambitious chiefs therefore sought to enlarge their political influence by strategic marriages and the concluding of treaties – which never held longer than the lifetime of those who concluded them, and often considerably shorter. The problem was that all these ambitious chiefs possessed the same type of legitimation, so none of them could really claim a higher status than the others. In a later article Hagesteijn gives many details about the problems that were created by this unclear type of legitimation (Hagesteijn 1996). It is not clear if we can speak already of early states here. From her analysis it appears that only when after some centuries a new ideology was

introduced in the region which provided rulers with a stronger type of sacred legitimation, some of the rulers could develop their polities into early states such as Angkor, Ayudhya, and Pagan, though even these were not very stable (Hagesteijn 1987, 1989).

The whole evolutionary process in this region has nothing to do with environmental or social circumscription as required by Carneiro's theory (1970), and just as little with war or population pressure, irrigation works or pastoralists. Qualifying in this case were incidental overproduction, the existence of an ideology which accorded the giver a higher status than the receiver, and the phenomenon that after a prolonged period of prosperity the villagers were inclined to give the fortunate farmer presents in return for blessings. Ideological factors clearly played the decisive role here – though economic aspects cannot be left out of the analysis for the gifts became in the course of time indispensable for the ruler, who then started to enforce the payments, an activity that in the eyes of more law-abiding peasants was correct; he acted legitimate.

5. THE COMPLEX INTERACTION MODEL

Let us now see if it is possible with the help of our findings thus far to come to a more general model of political evolution. The presence of a certain territory and a certain number of people are basic; without these factors no polity can exist. There is also needed a surplus with the help of which a government can be financed. This depends on the fertility of the territory, and the population density. This combination forms the first general factor for the model, which we called the **societal format**, covering the number of people in relation to the means of production and the area of land available. The factor surplus is too restrictive for a general model; the economic factor contains much more than just the production of a surplus. Phenomena like management (as Engels already emphasized), irrigation, handicrafts, infrastructure and trade should also be subsumed under this term. Therefore the second general factor is: **domination and control of the economy**. The third general factor of the model is **ideology**; ideology being considered here to be a coherent set of ideas – religious or political – that influences the behavioral pattern of its adherents. These three general factors form the basis of the **Complex Interaction Model**, as we baptized it (Claessen, van de Velde, and Smith 1985; Claessen

and van de Velde 1987). A complex, mutual, reciprocal interaction of these three factors create the circumstances under which socio-political organizations emerge, or which trigger off a more elaborated types thereof (Claessen 2000: 155). The **socio-political organization** then becomes the fourth general factor of the model which in its turn influences the other three and acts as a co-determinant.

One may ask what place is accorded in this model to **war** or **conquest**. Without underestimating the influence of war and conquest on the development of socio-political organizations, these phenomena are much more likely to have been the consequences of disturbances in the ideological, economic, or demographic situation than forces in themselves; they thus cannot be considered as independent factors, they are derivatives. Naturally, sometimes war or conquest is clearly involved in developments towards a state organization, but neither war, nor conquest should – speaking in general terms – be considered a sufficient or necessary factor. There are many cases in which early states developed without war or conquest having played a role, though there are also cases in which war seems to have been decisive (discussion in Claessen 2006). Well-known examples of war being a dominant factor in their development to statehood are the states of the Incas and the Aztecs. In the middle of the fifteenth century several large chiefdoms in the Andes, led by ambitious chiefs, were competing for dominance over the region. Though the origins of the Inca chiefdom goes back to about 1200 A.D. first under the rule of Pachacuti (1438–1471) the jump to an early state was made by defeating in a fierce war the neighboring Chanca ‘who had the capacity to destroy the incipient Inca state’ (Patterson 1991: 62; Conrad and Demarest 1984). After this victory the Incas formed their empire by subjecting a number of tribes and chiefdoms in the Andes region. Indeed, war was the decisive factor here. The same holds for the Aztecs of Central Mexico (see also paragraph 11). This people began its career in the middle of the fourteenth century on a few muddy islets in Lake Texcoco. Here they built a few cities, among which Tenochtitlan, that was to become their capital. After some time the small islets were no longer sufficient to feed the growing population and the Aztecs directed their attention to the shores of the lake where they conquered and subjected a number of peoples

living along the shores. By enjoining various alliances they expanded their power considerably and in the middle of the fifteenth century they had become the dominant force in the region; the Aztecs had developed an early state organization (Conrad and Demarest 1984; Hicks 1986). Both early states were short lived, however. They experienced serious internal difficulties and both were destroyed by the Spanish *conquistadores* in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

6. THE AFRICAN SITUATION

The findings thus far seem to suggest that once certain conditions are present, the development of an early state organization will occur automatically. This, however, would be taking the corner too slightly. There are cases known in which, favorable conditions notwithstanding, development towards a more complex sociopolitical formation did not take place. A good example of such a non-fulfilled promise offers the Mbundu people from the African region of Angola. The Mbundu were matrilineal and lived in segmentary villages, the leadership over which rested in the hands of the leader of the most prominent lineage. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were several attempts to form a larger political unit. The first attempt was made by the leaders of the *lunga* cult, a wooden image associated with rain, rivers and fertility. Despite their efforts, and an attractive ideological basis, no coherent state evolved along these lines. The segmentary ideology which kept the villages separated was stronger than the power of the *lunga* to bind. Several years later the efforts of the adherents of the *ngola* cult, an iron image, went the same way. Although the cult leaders set some political arrangements in motion, a recognizable early state never eventuated and the changes they brought about did not prove permanent. Also in this case the segmentary, egalitarian ideology was too strong. Seen in terms of the Complex Interaction Model, here is thus found a solid societal format (number of people in the thousands, sufficient fertile land), a sound economy (ample surpluses), but the lack of an ideology supportive of a hierarchical structure prevented political centralization (Miller 1976; Claessen 2000: 146). It can be surmised, however, that with different ideological convictions state formation among the Mbundu might have occurred. State formation finally occurred here only after having

been conquered by some neighboring groups. The developments – or rather the lack of developments – among the Mbundu resemble in many respects those among the Chibuk, who live in the Sahel region of Africa, described by Ronald Cohen (1981: 105–109). Also here strong feelings of independence among the many small and locally autonomous communities prevented cooperation in political respects.

Many African societies, however, demonstrate a different attitude towards a hierarchical political organization. In most of these cases leadership is connected with the notion of ‘the first’. It is believed that the person who was the first to open the earth for agriculture met with the earth spirits, with whom he concludes a kind of ‘contract’ in which it is agreed that in exchange for certain, specified, rituals, he can procure fertility of women, land and cattle. This belief is widespread and is still found to play a great role as recent anthropological fieldwork reveals (for West Africa: Muller 1999; Zuiderwijk 1998: 92; East Africa: Pels 2004: 11ff.; Southern Africa: van Binsbergen 1979. Cf. Cohen 1981, who found this belief in a number of Sahel communities). The one who ‘opened’ the earth and his successors are known as the earth priest, or the Lord of the Land (Simonse 1992). According to some traditions the earth priest lost in several regions his political prerogatives to the ‘hunter’, a (mythical) person assumed to have come from abroad and connected with distribution of meat. By marrying the daughter of the earth priest the hunter and his descendants became the dominant sacred political leaders, while in other cases the ritual power over fertility was divided between the ruler and the priest (see chapters on Africa in Claessen and Oosten 1996). Small groups of cultivators who want to settle in the area and desire to make a claim on the fertility magic of the ritual leader, have to ask his permission, which always is given, and in return have to display a certain degree of obedience. Treading this peaceful path, gradually not inconsiderable territorial units emerge (cf. Vansina 1991). In this connection Igor Kopytoff remarks that chiefs do not so much ‘rise above their neighbors as they were so to speak, “levitated” upwards as more immigrants arrived and inserted more layers at the bottom of the hierarchy’ (1999: 88). As explained already before (in paragraph 2), the assumed influence of the ruler on fertility provides a strong form of legitimation. On this ideological basis

chiefdoms as well as early states developed and functioned in the whole of Africa south of the Sahara (Muller 1981). In a number of cases such polities developed into early states, in other cases they remained chiefdoms.

The question now is: how and why did more complex socio-political structures develop out of these initially peaceful and voluntary associations? The key to an answer lies in the added statement that ‘a certain degree of obedience’ was expected of the followers of the earth priest or sacred leader. His adherents were supposed to follow his directions, and give small presents to him. This last duty developed gradually into the obligation to pay tax (a similar custom was mentioned earlier for Southeast Asian societies, in paragraph 4). Any socio-political leader – thus also the earth priest – has to cope with the problem of how to make his followers act according to the norms and values of the group – which usually means **his** norms and values. People do not obey rules and regulations – the payment of taxation for example – just automatically. They often seek to escape obligations or try to interpret the rules to their own advantage (cf. Malinowski 1926). Most leaders thus had to develop mechanisms to cope with deviant behavior (Claessen 2003: 163). Even in voluntary associations it cannot be expected that every individual will agree with all decisions or requests of the leader. Such individuals make a degree of coercion by the leader inevitable (*Idem* 2005: 155ff.). Once the leader – the earth priest, the hunter, the prosperous Kachin farmer – decides to coerce disobedient members of his society, a further step in the direction of an early state organization is set. The leader who in such a case exerts pressure is within his rights; his people will agree with his actions; he is the legitimate leader, his position demands some income – if only to be able to hand out food and goods to faithful followers – and by showing his power in a right case he strengthens his position considerably.

These developments bring the polity in question to a crucial point. Will the political leader and his entourage continue in the direction of more power, more income, more status, and more subjects, or will they decide to be content with the situation reached thus far? The choice is not always wholly free to them. Neighboring groups may try to conquer their lands, defense – and thus armed conflict or war – will take place, interesting opportunities

for trade may lie ahead, but trade routes must be protected, and internal unrest may prevent further developments – all conditions that will influence a decision. In an important article Patricia Shiferd (1987: 47) stated that continued centralization is certainly not inevitable. ‘In fact continued centralization was the least common outcome in the sample (her sample) at hand’. Only when some necessary conditions were present, and successfully assimilated, the development of an early state occurred. The presence of competing polities, the possibilities of profitable trade, the wish to enlarge the own polity – such conditions may be decisive for development towards statehood, depending on the way in which is reacted to them.

A good example of such a more or less forced development towards statehood is found on the island of Madagascar (Kottak 1980; Claessen 2000). The Betsileo, the society in question, lived at the east side of Madagascar in small villages, where they cultivated rice in the coastal plains on irrigated terraces. Their existence was threatened when in the early seventeenth century slave hunters tried to capture people. To protect themselves against this danger they erected hill top forts, and defended themselves from these successfully against the slave hunters. In this way they were able to stay near their rice fields. Because of the relative safety of the hill forts great numbers of people sought refuge there. This led to population pressure in the hill top settlements, and more and more administrative measures became necessary to maintain law and order within the forts. This demanded stronger leadership than was customary (as pointed out by Johnson 1978, 1982). In Betsileo society there existed already clan leaders, endowed with some form of sacred legitimacy. From their midst persons came to the fore who took the necessary measures to organize social life in the forts. As clan leaders they had already a sacred status, and, together with their increasing powers, they soon became considered to possess this quality in a stronger measure than the other leaders, and they were elevated above all others. The growing complexity of the society made it inevitable to develop measures to ensure that rules and regulations were carried out – if necessary by force. In this way a reasonable degree of order in the overcrowded forts was reached and safety as well as a sufficient flow of goods and food was ensured. At the end of these developments the Betsileo ful-

filled all criteria for an early state organization, a consequence of decisions made long ago, **which were never intended** to create a state. Yet there had developed a three tier socio-political organization for the regulation of social relations in a complex stratified society, divided into at least two basic strata, the rulers and the ruled, whose relations are characterized by political dominance of the former and the obligation to obey and pay taxation of the latter, legitimized by a common ideology of which reciprocity is the basic principle – the definition of an early state in *optima forma*! It should be added here that the way in which the Betsileo created a state is not exceptional. Ronald Cohen (1981) describes similar developments among the agricultural Pabir and Biu living near to each other in the Sahel, south of the predatory state of Borno. To protect themselves against the raids from Borno the Pabir build walled towns, and within these walls the Pabir and the Biu took refuge and were relatively safe. Increase of population within the walls necessitated stronger forms of government, and gradually the most sacred and powerful head of one of the Pabir lineages grew into the king of a small state.

7. SOME CONCLUSIONS

Only when a number of specified conditions are present at the same time and in the same society, and when some triggering accident or accidents occur, the evolution of an early state may take place – provided that a positive feedback between these conditions is found. The conditions can be summarized as follows:

- a sufficient number of people to form a complex, stratified society;
- the control over a specific territory;
- a productive system providing a sufficient surplus to maintain the necessary specialists and the privileged group;
- an ideology, which explains and justifies a hierarchical governmental organization and socio-political inequality;
- some cause or influence that triggers the developments.

In view of this long list of conditions (based on Claessen 2002) it will not be surprising that many societies, seemingly well-equipped to develop into more complex socio-political formations, never reached that higher level. May be there was not sufficient ambition among the leaders, may be not all conditions were suffi-

ciently fulfilled, may be there was no sufficient positive feedback, may be they were overpowered by stronger neighbors or by whatever other impediment, but further development did not occur. They often remained simple groups of people, characterized by some ranking or a beginning stratification; may be even a simple chiefdom. Some such groups, however, develop into what Leonid Grinin (2004, 2009) calls early state analogues or early state alternatives, which means that these societies developed a complex socio-political structure, but do not qualify as states (see also section 13). In such pre-state societies the majority of mankind has lived for a very long time, and many societies still live so.

One question remains to be answered: why did the early state evolve only a few thousand years ago? Already Engels (1884) pointed to the relatively short time span that states were found to exist. An answer to this question must of needs be hypothetical. It seems probable that the fundamental climatic changes that occurred some 10.000 years ago played a decisive role. The climate on earth became considerably warmer and rain increased. Under these conditions something as the Neolithic Revolution could take place. Agriculture developed gradually in several places on earth and this led to a different pattern of living. Men became sedentary, groups increased in size, numerous inventions were made. These conditions for living were completely new. Before this climatic change large parts of the globe were covered with ice. Small human groups lived of hunting and gathering and led a wandering life which prevented them to keep many goods, to build houses, grow to an old age, and so on. One might surmise that under the more favorable conditions in the Holocene finally larger groups of people started living in villages in permanent dwellings and practicing agriculture. From that moment on larger political structures could develop. Big Men, Chiefs, and Kings finally entered the stage, never to leave it again (Cook 2003; Diamond 1998; Fagan 1998).

8. THE EARLY STATE AND AFTER

This paragraph could be summarized in one sentence: the early state is no more. The early state is a phenomenon of the past, and all research into early states is *historical*. From a wide variety of sources we **construct** a picture of early states, which is in fact no

more than our construction of a certain type of socio-political organization existing long ago and far away. Our sources are data from history, archaeology, and ethno-history. And that is all we have; we thus have to do with limited information. Certainly, several early states have been visited by people who noted what they saw – or thought they saw, which is not the same. Marco Polo traveled in the fourteenth century through large parts of China, and his observations made in the service of the emperor are most valuable for us. Yet he reported only on limited parts of Chinese society from that time and on limited topics. The reports on the Mongols by envoys from the pope and the king of France, such as Plano Carpini, and Willem van Rubroek, in the thirteenth century, are detailed and trustworthy, but they did not present a complete picture of Mongolian culture (Polo 1958; Dawson 1966; de Hartog 1985). The same holds for the often lengthy and detailed Spanish chronicles of the Inca and Aztec empires. They presented the Amerindian states through the eyes of the conquistador. This is not to say that their works have no value, but one has to use them carefully and we often must read between the lines. The same holds for the deservedly highly esteemed reports of Captain James Cook and his companions on eighteenth century Polynesia. But, how conscientiously and carefully they observed the islanders and how detailed they reported on Polynesian customs, they did not see everything, and did not understand all they saw. Fortunately many of the data gathered by early travelers have been supplemented and corrected by later archaeological and ethnological research (Kirch and Green 2001).

Early states are found on widely varying moments in history. They emerged some five thousands years ago in China, Mesopotamia and Egypt. In parts of Africa functioning early states such as Buganda, Bunyoro and Rwanda were found in the middle of the nineteenth century. There are thus found large differences in time and place between early states. Yet comparative research has demonstrated that early states were **structurally** similar (Claessen and Skalník 1978; Haas 1995). This suggests that their structure was sound and functionally satisfying; functionally less successful types of socio-political structures collapsed and disappeared or were conquered by more efficient forms of organization, all along the lines of evolution as stated by Darwin. Yet, early states are no more and the question thus arises: why not?

9. STABILITY OR INSTABILITY?

Some scholars wonder if early states were perhaps structurally *in-stable*. For example Renée Hagesteijn (1989: 144) points out that many early states after only a short period of existence disappeared. The region where she did her research is a case in point. In early Southeast Asia ambitious rulers never succeeded in extending a permanent kind of sway over other polities. Eventual larger polities collapsed soon after having been established. This is an exceptional situation, for elsewhere early states existed for many centuries and showed all aspects of a stable structure. Besides, it should be noted that not only early states existed sometimes for a short time only, but several modern, industrialized states disappeared also after only a short time as, for example, the German empire (1870–1917), and the German Democratic Republic (1944–1989). It seems thus useful first to clarify the concepts stable and unstable, before we implement them. The British archaeologist David Clarke introduced them in 1968 in his book *Analytical archaeology* (1968: 49). In his view a system (thus also a political system) has a *stable* equilibrium when small displacements from the equilibrium state gives rise to a return to that state in due course; eventual disturbances are compensated by counter movements by which the equilibrium of the system is restored. When the system has an *unstable* equilibrium, however, small displacements from the equilibrium state give rise to a cumulative greater displacement from that specific state and often the system then will break down.

It seems possible thus, to take the lifespan of an early state as an indicator for the degree of stability or instability of its structure. One may assume that early states, existing for a century or more, possessed the capacity to compensate small displacements of the equilibrium by developing counter moves. Early states that after even small disturbances collapse then are unstable, and do not survive long. It is clear that the many Southeast Asian polities – build on the basis of a rather stable chiefdom or *muang* – trying to reach the position of an early state, and never succeeding in retaining that status once it was reached, are good examples of unstable early states (Hagesteijn 1989). The *muangs* were relatively small, stable political entities, with a strong center, surrounded by a number of minor local settlements. These were narrowly connected with that center, and depended on it in political, economic, military, and

ideological respects. Efforts of the chiefs to extend their power over other *muangs* were doomed to fail, however. They sometimes succeeded in constructing a conglomerate of subjected regions, sometimes by force, and sometimes by marriages, by presents, or by treaties. But once the army had withdrawn, the marriage was ended by divorce or death, the presents consumed, and the treaties forgotten the connection with the ambitious ruler ended. The short-lived early states here were extremely instable.

Examples of stable early states, existing for several centuries, abound. One could think of early Egypt, that several interruptions notwithstanding, emerged each time and continued its existence again for centuries. Early states such as Teotihuacán or the Maya states in Pre Spanish Mexico, or West African Dahomey showed also great continuity. As an example I will present here the Polynesian early state of Tonga (Claessen 1970: 32–61; 1988a, 1996; Burley 1998). The dynastic lists of the rulers, the *tui tonga*, mention thirty-six rulers. Estimating that each of them ruled for some twenty-five years (the time span used by most Polynesianists), the dynasty existed for some 900 years. The last *tui tonga* died in 1865, so his line must have been begun about 1000 A.D. In the course of the eleventh century the then *tui tonga* erected an impressive stone gateway, a clear evidence that he could command the large number of people needed to erect such a monument. At the same time several large stone tombs were erected near the royal residence at Lapaha (Burley 1998: 373ff.). The Tongan political organization had reached the level of an early state in the fourteenth century. Tongan influence then had reached a number of islands. Archaeological evidence of Tongan influence is found through the whole archipelago, but also on near-by ‘Uvea, while many, mainly legendary, references are found about political relations between Tonga and Samoa. A possible explanation for this spread of influence may be found in the custom of ‘strategic marriages’. This type of marriages occurred when younger sons or younger brothers of leading notables at Tongatapu went, or were sent, to distant villages or islands to marry the daughter(s) of local headmen. The son of the immigrant aristocrat and the chief’s daughter usually succeeded to the leadership position. In this way

Tongan influence was spread, without war, occupation, and defeat (Claessen 1988a; Burley 1998). During the reign of the twenty-fourth *tui tonga* great resistance arose against his policy and he had to fly to nearby Samoa. This did not harm the stability of the Tongan polity, for descendants of a younger brother took over political power and ruled instead of the *tui tonga*, who, however, retained his sacred position. After the return of the sacred ruler (or rather his grandson), there were two lines of high chiefs in Tonga, to which soon a third was added, between which a fierce competition for power developed. Yet, the unrest at the top notwithstanding, the Tongan early state continued for another century, till the arrival of European explorers disturbed the delicate balance of power. A civil war ensued, which ended the Tongan early state. Soon after that war, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new Tongan state arose, in which the rulers – descendants of one of the former chiefly lines – gained the status of ‘modern’ kings, while their state, under British guidance, reached the level of a developed state, which it still is today.

As stated in section 8, early states do not exist anymore. They all disappeared, the instable ones as well as the stable ones. This suggests that, though the application of these concepts is certainly of help in understanding the structure of early states, they are not sufficient to explain the disappearance of early state organizations all over the world. In the processes leading to the end of early states, there are logically three possibilities:

- a. Early states developed into mature states;
- b. Early states stagnated, declined or collapsed;
- c. Early states were subjected and incorporated into larger organizations, or were colonized.

I will discuss these three possibilities here shortly.

10. TOWARDS THE MATURE STATE

In *The Early State* the concept of the mature state was not yet mentioned. We introduced it some years later in *Early state dynamics* (Claessen and van de Velde 1987: 4, 5; Bargatzky 1987: 30–32). In the *The Early State* (Claessen and Skalník 1978) we concentrated on early states only, and distinguished therein three levels of or-

ganization, namely the inchoate (incipient), the typical and the transitional type of early state (discussed in section 2). Obviously, the most probable candidates for the development into mature states are the transitional ones. Of the twenty-one cases only six were considered by us as transitional, namely early China (the Yin and Chou polities), late medieval France, the Aztecs, Jimma, Kuba, and Maurya. That but few early states in our sample could be considered as transitional is not surprising. The combination of all the necessary factors at the same time and in a positive feedback is indeed – in the words of Patricia Shifferd (1987) – the least probable outcome of the evolutionary process. Later publications demonstrated that several other early states could be added to the list of transitional ones, such as West African Asante and Dahomey, and the seventeenth century Central African Congo state (and there certainly were many more).

We considered states as *mature* when the following characteristics were present: a different type of (legalistic) legitimation of the ruler, a managerial, bureaucratic type of administrative organization, appointed, salaried officials, a market economy, the use of money, the beginning of antagonistic classes, a regular system of taxation, a permanent police force, the existence of codified laws and punishments, and formal judges (Claessen 2005: 152).

Recently Leonid Grinin (2008) proposed a different approach of the concept of mature state. In his opinion this category was far too broad, for it included modern capitalistic states, varying from the United Kingdom to Russia, as well as a number of pre-capitalistic states, such as Capitian France, the Roman Empire, Byzantium, and Tudor England. To mark the difference he proposed to call the modern capitalist states from now on **mature states**, and the other group, the pre-capitalistic ones, **developed states**. This distinction is a great improvement of our classification, and I shall follow this distinction in the remainder of the analysis.

From the transitional cases mentioned above but few reached the level of the developed state. The Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish led by Hernán Cortes in 1521. Asante was twice defeated by the British (in 1874 and 1896), and finally conquered and made into a colony in 1900. Dahomey was defeated by France during its colonial expansion in 1894, and conquered in 1898. Jimma and Kuba both were colonized during the nineteenth century by Euro-

pean powers (Italy, Belgium). Maurya declined and finally collapsed because of internal weaknesses and the same fate befell Congo. We shall never know to what extent these states might have evolved towards developed ones; especially the Aztecs, Asante and Dahomey had gone quite far on that road already.

So, from our sample only China, and medieval France reached the level of a developed state. They were, of course, not the only polities that reached this level. One may think of fifteenth century England, the duchy of Burgundy, the Japan of the *shoguns*, the Islamic empire of the Abbasids, the Roman Empire and many others. These, however, were not included in our project. I will give here, as an example of the difficult road to a developed state, a very abridged overview of the checkered history of medieval France.

The state of France started its career in the fifth century A.D. after the breakdown of the Roman Empire, when a certain Clovis was elected leader of a group of invading German tribes, known as the Franks. Ruthlessly Clovis conquered large parts of nowadays France, and build from these regions a beginning early state. His successors, known as the Merovingians, ruled till the middle of the eight century over an internally divided realm, each part of which was ruled by a separate branch of the royal family. It was a turbulent period, during which the members of the one branch repeatedly tried to murder the members of the other branches. In the course of the eight century the Merovingian dynasty came to an end and was replaced by the Carolingians, who had to rebuild the state from the ruins left by their predecessors. The rulers of this dynasty did much better and improved the political organization considerably. Charlemagne, the most famous of the Carolingians, extended his realm greatly, and added large parts of Germany to it. It is claimed that he ruled over the territory between the Ebro (in Spain) and the Elbe (in Germany). The administrative apparatus was enlarged, written laws and orders became common (the *capitularia*), and *missi dominici* (pairs of a bishop and a count), were sent by the king to inspect what was going on in the realm. His costly policy could only be paid as long as regularly new lands were conquered, for France was very poor then. When, under his successor, Louis the Pious, conquests came to an end, problems arose. The sons of Louis fought fierce wars over the heritage and in the end the realm was divided into three parts. After about a cen-

tury the Carolingian family died out, and in the western part, France, a new dynasty came to the fore, the Capetians. They inherited a practically bankrupt polity. Their powerbase consisted mainly of a capital, Paris, and its surroundings, and the title of 'king'. Patiently, and with great cunning, they set out to rebuild what once had been a large state. It took them from 987 to 1200 to do this. They succeeded, however, convincingly. Under Philip II, who ruled from 1180–1223 this state reached the level of a transitional one, and was soon to become a developed state. All requirements were fulfilled: there was a large, appointed and salaried bureaucracy, a flourishing market economy, a taxation system that brought in large revenues, a codified legal system, professional judges were dominant, and kingship became based on new legalizing ideas (feudalism). Under his successors France continued to be a developed state, even when the fortunes of war sometimes were rather contrary (Claessen 1985), finally growing into a mature state.

This overview shows that the road to a developed state was not always straightforward. There were setbacks as well as periods of flourish. In the end, however, the level of organization was so strong that neither setbacks nor misfortunes could destroy the state.

11. STAGNATION, DECLINE, COLLAPSE: AZTECS AND AFRICANS

Stagnation means that a polity – an early state in this case – has developed to a certain level of organization, but is not able to develop further. It has apparently reached the limits of its possibilities. Decline means that gradually the level of complexity decreases. There is less coherence, and regional or local centers begin to develop some degree of independence. If this process is not halted, the end of the polity is inevitable. Collapse, finally, means that a polity suffers from a rapid, significant loss of an established level of socio-political complexity (Tainter 1988: 4; also Kennedy 1989).

The Polish historian Michael Tymowski analyzed in great detail the *stagnation* of state formation in the West African Sudan. Between the eighth and nineteenth century developed here a number of early states, to begin with ancient Ghana, which existed from the eighth to the twelfth century A.D. in the western part of the Sudan. It was rich in gold, conducted a wide trans-Saharan

trade, and counted several large towns, of which the capital Kumbi Saleh was the largest. In the thirteenth century Ghana was defeated by Mali, a new state created by the Malinke, a people living east of Ghana. This new early state was for some time quite successful. It conquered a number of neighboring polities and reached finally from the Ocean coast till Gao and Timbuktu at the river Niger in the east. It lost its supremacy to Songhai in the fifteenth century. Songhai extended its reach further into the east of the Sudan, but was finally defeated by a Moroccan army at the end of the sixteenth century. Now the interesting fact is that none of these states ever was able to cross the level to a developed (mature, as Tymowski termed it) state. According to Tymowski (1987: 57ff.) several factors were responsible for this stagnation. As a first impediment he points to the fact that none of the governments ever was able to break the independence of the local communities. The extended family groups and the local communities were pre-state phenomena and many high placed functionaries maintained tight connections with these groups. They protected the interests of these entities in the first place, instead of serving those of the state. Large amounts of money were invested in the local groups and as a consequence the development of a sound national polity was hampered seriously. The large trans-Sahara trade did not bring the expected rewards, for the greater part of the profits went to the entrepreneurs in far away countries. The flourishing slave trade depleted large regions of able bodied persons. Finally, the succession to high office was a difficult and complex matter, for the rulers had many wives, and thus many sons who all were entitled – and eager – to succeed. This led to never ending wars of succession – which were quite detrimental for the further development of the state. As in none of the polities changes could be brought about in this situation, there was no possibility for these states ever to develop to a higher level of complexity. The best they ever reached was the typical early state (cf. Tymowski 2004). Stagnation indeed is the term to characterize the situation in the West Sudan till the sixteenth century. Later developing early states in this region did not fare better, not even the nineteenth century states of the Bembara or the Fulbe ever came further than the level of an early state. Finally it would be France, colonizing the greater part of the Sudan at the end of

the nineteenth century that made an end to the many indigenous early states here.

Decline means a gradual loss of the level of complexity. In other words, the governmental center is no longer able to maintain its grip on the developments. For some time the appearance of a well run state organization might be maintained, but once serious problems arise, the internal weaknesses begin to show. There are many cases of initially well run (early) states that after a certain period of time lost control, declined, and finally collapsed. The Roman Empire is a well-known example of a state in which decline became dominant from the third century on. The costs of maintaining the borders of the empire against the ever increasing number of barbarous tribes became higher and higher, and the population had to pay ever higher taxes for which the government gave ever less compensation (Meijer 2005). One might object to this example that imperial Rome was not an early state. That is true, but it shows that decline and fall are not characteristic of early states only – as was shown in great detail by Paul Kennedy (1989). In several cases the loss of legitimacy of the ruler led to decline, and often to collapse of an early state organization. In section 2, it was mentioned how, because of ecological disasters, the rulers of Easter Island, and the Old Kingdom of Egypt, were no longer able to fulfill the expectations of the population. As a consequence they lost their position and their kingdoms collapsed. A more complex case of decline and collapse presents the early state of the Aztecs.

The Aztecs were a warlike people in Middle America that in the fifteenth century built a state by conquest and subjection. There were two factors that mainly determined their war-like attitude:

- the need to obtain food, goods and raw materials for the maintenance of their capital, Tenochtitlan, build on a small island in Lake Texcoco. As the surroundings of the Lake could not procure sufficient quantities of food and goods, the Aztecs needed to look further, and started to trade with far away peoples. When peaceful trade no longer procured the large quantities of food and goods that were needed, conquest and subjection were the following steps, and the subjected peoples had to pay heavy tributes. When they revolted against the heavy pressures, Aztec armies punished them mercilessly and carried away a number of men to be

offered to the gods in Tenochtitlan. Then the punished group had to pay more tribute which had to be produced with less people. This way of handling the subjected peoples caused a deep hatred of the Aztecs.

– the second reason was a religious one. The gods of the Aztecs, the most prominent of which was Huitzilopochtli, had an insatiable need of human blood and hearts. This occasioned unceasing warfare to obtain captives and slaves to offer. The Aztecs believed that the very survival of the universe depended on these offerings and so they needed military victories, for this was the only means to obtain the necessary number of humans to sacrifice (Conrad and Demarest 1984: 44ff.). The gods feeded on the blood and the hearts in order to be able to fight their perpetual struggle against the forces of darkness – and this belief created the never ending succession of wars, captives, sacrifices, and new wars.

Yet, though the Aztecs subjected several peoples, and sacrificed numerous humans, their ambitions were larger than their possibilities. The provisioning of Tenochtitlan remained vulnerable, and several peoples, the Chalca, the Tlaxcalans, and the Tarascans never were defeated and subjected. They remained pockets of resistance in the realm of the Aztecs. Moreover, the subjected regions never were assimilated in a kind of unified realm; which in fact was never attempted by their oppressors. The subjected peoples were only united in their hate of the Aztecs. Also economically the Aztecs experienced that there were limits to their growth. Distances over which food and goods had to be transported increased, while the yield decreased with distance, while much energy was spent in the import of luxury items for the imperial elite in Tenochtitlan (Drennan 1984). The heavy tributes imposed by the rulers repeatedly caused hunger and famine in the realm. Revolts increased in number and seriousness. Within the Aztec elite conflicts arose between the hereditary nobles, and ambitious successful warriors and merchants. The large polygynous households of the aristocrats became more and more a burden to the economic system that supported them.

The traditional policy of war and human sacrifices, conquest and taxation, became a destructive force instead of a basis for prosperity. A drastic change of policy in order to stabilize

the realm would be the only means to counter the dangerous situation. Yet the ideologically based wars could not easily be stopped, for, as believed by the Aztecs, the continuation of the whole universe depended upon the never ending supply of human sacrifices (Conrad and Demarest 1984: 58). Inevitably, however, the number of human sacrifices, as well as the economic support, dwindled down. Moctezuma II, the last Aztec ruler, was aware that serious reforms were urgently needed. His efforts to start consolidation and stabilization went right against the dominant ideology, however. This made his position vulnerable and demoralized his people. In fact, he lost his legitimacy. In this critical situation the Spaniards landed on the coast of Mexico. The end of the declining Aztec realm became inevitable. Tributary groups rose in revolt and neighboring peoples supported Cortés as much as they could. The trust in the once dominating ideology changed into despair, and after fierce resistance Tenochtitlan was conquered and destroyed by Cortés. The realm of the Aztecs became a Spanish colony in 1521.

Here we come to an important point. The Aztec polity *collapsed* in the end. Its capital was conquered and destroyed and many Aztecs, soldiers, women, children, nobles and priests lost their lives in the slaughter. Many similar endings of states are known. They all show the same development: a serious overstretching of its possibilities and as a consequence decline sets in. At first hardly noticeable, but more and more increasing in time. The once powerful polity weakens and enemies and competitors are ready to take over its position as soon as possible. It does not make a difference if it concerns the Incas in the Andes, the Aztecs in Central Mexico, the ambitious Romans, or the conquering Carolingians; they all lost the race for survival. New powers subjected the weakening or declining polities, reformed the existing political apparatus and established governors, selected either from collaborators or from the ranks of the conquerors. What usually does not change or disappear is the population; it is the political system that collapses. The farmers, the craftsmen, the weavers, the cooks and the townsmen continue to live in the same villages and towns as before, though sometimes seriously depleted. They mainly retain their traditional culture, though it is true that the Spaniards tried to change the traditional beliefs of the conquered peoples and im-

ported Christianity in Latin America. Superficially seen they succeeded quite well, but under a surface of Christianity many traits of the old culture do still exist, and continue to do so till the present day...

Collapse, thus, is a matter of a rapid loss of an established level of socio-political complexity; but does not imply that a culture or a population disappears. They will hold on – the wholesale slaughter by the Roman legions in Gaul, the Mongols in medieval Persia, or the Spaniards in Mexico notwithstanding.

12. INCORPORATION OR COLONIZATION?

In the previous section several times was referred to the fact that defeated early states were incorporated into the conquering polities, or were colonized. There is reason to think that one speaks of incorporation when the conquered region is near-by and of colonization when the defeated region is far away. There is hardly a difference between the fate of an incorporated region and a colonized one, however. In both cases they were mercilessly exploited. This holds for the provinces in Italy which were incorporated in the Roman Empire, as well as for those subjected by the Aztecs in Middle America. The British (and the Dutch) exploited their far away colonial empire in the same vein. There was no real difference in position.

In many cases the conquered polities – early states or other – were already in the process of decline. The collapse of the Aztec state is a good example of this. A declining polity is easier to defeat than a state in full flower. Naturally there have been defeated and incorporated or colonized early states in full flower, too. There are, for example, no reasons to think of the Asante as a polity in decline when it was defeated by the British and made into a colony, nor was Dahomey an early state in decline when France subjected it. The superior military powers of Britain or France were simply too much for the African armies.

13. AND THE MANY OTHERS?

Thus far this article concentrated on early states. Their structure, their development, and their fall were discussed. There is one aspect of the evolution of political systems that should have been

emphasized more, namely the fact that of the countless chiefdoms but few ever became an early state, and that from the many early states but few developed into a mature state. The question then is: what happened to the polities that did not become an early state? The answer is obvious: as long as they were not defeated and subjected they continued to remain chiefdoms, or big man polities, or headships, or whatever. The great majority of North American Indian tribes remained tribes, as well as the many tribes in South America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, and so on. Till the ominous moment that they were subjected, or colonized, of course.

A special problem in the study of more complex socio-political organizations is created by the Greek *poleis*. Can the *polis* be considered as an early state – or not? This question is not simple to answer. In the first place differences in size and number of people varies greatly. But few of the Greek polities counted their inhabitants in the thousands; others were much smaller. In the second place their political organization was quite different of the one of early states, if only because of their democratic structure. There were – with the exception of Sparta – no kings, though perhaps the so called *tyrants* might qualify as such. These rulers, however, usually ruled but short. Edward van der Vliet has given these problems a lot of attention, without ever coming to a definitive statement (van der Vliet 1987, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Since some years there has developed a serious interest in this type of polities. It was shown that in many cases their socio-political organization was as complex as those of early states. The only feature lacking was that of hierarchy; for there was not found an ideology explaining and justifying a stratifying principle. For such polities the term **heterarchy** was introduced by Carole Crumley basing herself on the organization of the Celtic chiefdoms (Arnold and Gibson 1995; cf. Bondarenko 2006). Sometime later concepts such as **analogues** or **alternatives of early states** were suggested. Especially among Russian anthropologists and historians these concepts found a willing ear – as appears for example from the volume *The Early State, its Alternatives and Analogues*, edited by Leonid Grinin and others (2004), in which a number of articles on these subjects are brought together (see also Grinin 2009; Grinin and Korotayev 2009). In their opinion the evolution towards the state is only one of many

possible processes; there have developed many polities whose political organization is as complex as those of early states, but are not states – and they are right. For there is more between heaven and earth than there is dreamt of in your philosophy. It is here, however, that I end this article. The analysis of different evolutionary trajectories would lead too far from the initial subject.

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