

## **Introduction**

### **The scope of**

### **Robert Buijtenhuijs's work**

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The present collection brings together eleven articles by scholars in the field of African Studies, who over the years have collaborated closely with Robert Buijtenhuijs and who have been undergone the inspiration of his work and personality. As such, this volume as a whole is a fitting tribute to an author who not only has been prolific and many-sided, but whose work over more than thirty years has been characterised by a sustained dedication to the causes of freedom and democracy on the African continent, and who in the process has always struggled to achieve and retain a level of intellectual integrity and accountability that has inspired others of his generation and of the later generations now filling the ranks of African political, social and religious studies. Robert Buijtenhuijs, through his work, has intellectually participated in some of the most significant processes of political transformation to take place on the African continent in the second half of the twentieth century, and in some of the most crucial debates in the world of African Studies. In consequence, the present book reflects in a nutshell some of the central problematics of Africa and of African Studies in recent decades, and its list of contributors, more than merely reflecting a personal network of friends and colleagues, includes some of the central names in these debates.

Ever since his pioneering and seminal Ph.D. work on Mau Mau as directed by George Balandier, Robert Buijtenhuijs has been fascinated by the phenomenon of revolutionary movements and peasant wars in Africa : their classification, the meticulous investigation of their specific trajectories, their interpretation, and the positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis these vital but confusing and apparently contradictory phenomena. Inevitably a large section of this book had to be devoted to contributions reflecting this central interest. Here Robert Buijtenhuijs has in the first place asserted himself as a contemporary historian, whose main stock in trade has been the combination of an inquisitive, realistic mind suspicious of theorising, with the painstaking and highly inventive search for primary data. This search Buijtenhuijs sometimes had to conduct under dangerous circumstances which

most researchers would intuitively shun, or under circumstances more familiar from espionage thrillers than from real-life political anthropology. In the more recent decades it would increasingly take him, as a welcome outsider, to the corridors of national power, at an African country's national democratic assembly. Much of Buijtenhuijs's research time, however, was spent in prosaic newspaper archives, plodding through tons of clippings and unpublished news reports. Not the creation but the debunking of grand theory was among his objectives, and it is no accident that his dream of ever writing a grand book on African Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century never materialised – fourteen other books were realised instead, several of them modern classics in their own right, many of them containing interesting comparative and theoretical excursions ; yet at crucial moments Robert Buijtenhuijs has always preferred the thrill of entering, and rendering, a new specific situation with its own tensions and topicalities, over the comparative and theoretical scope required for such an oneiric magnum opus. It showed him the true contemporary historian he has been, more than the political anthropologist he may have been by training.

The tributes which the present book contains in the section of «Revolutions and Peasant Wars» adequately reflect much of Buijtenhuijs's important work in this field.

Having written four major books and a large number of articles on Chad, it is appropriate that the series of contributions should open with the French historian Bernard Lanne's overview of three quarters of a century of Chadian political history up to the coup of 1975. Colonisation by France took place in the years 1900-1914. Drawn into the orbit of French Equatorial Africa (A.E.F.), Chad was successively a military territory, then a colony with a civilian governor. In 1946, under the French Union, Chad became an Overseas Territory of the French Republic, and in that capacity was entitled to elect a local Assembly and delegates to the Parliament in Paris. The «loi-cadre» of 1956-57 provided it with an elected government council. The Republic of Chad was declared on 28 November, 1958, as an autonomous state, and a member of the French Commonwealth. It gained full independence on 11 August, 1960. François Tombalbaye as the head of state established a one-party system, but had to yield to a rebellious movement in the north of the country. The regime became more and more authoritarian and approached a police state. A military coup d'état meant the end of the regime on 13 April, 1975. It is then that the revolutionary movement manifested itself (Frolinat) which was to dominate the subsequent history of Chad, as well as a large part of Robert Buijtenhuijs's oeuvre.

Meanwhile Terence Ranger, the British historian, returns to Buijtenhuijs's earlier work on the history of the Kenyan Mau Mau movement. Ranger particularly traces the influence which the image of Mau Mau has had on a country which was to be the scene of a much later national war of liberation: Zimbabwe. When African nationalism was emerging in Zimbabwe, white commentators attempted to belittle it by claiming that it was a "mushroom growth", artificially stimulated from outside the country -

notably fed on the images of Mau Mau. Reacting against this, most historians of Zimbabwean nationalism have laid exclusive emphasis upon its indigenous origins and internal dynamics. It has been sufficiently established that Zimbabwean nationalism had deep roots. Thus it appears that the moment has come to re-examine the question of its external influences. Just as Robert Buijtenhuijs has made comparative studies of insurrection in Africa, so historians need to compare nationalisms and to look at the connections between them. Ranger's contribution explores the many and complex ways in which the violence of Mau Mau, treated so subtly by Buijtenhuijs, influenced African political opinion in Southern Rhodesia and contributed to the rise of African nationalism.

What does it mean if we use the terms «peasant war» or «war of liberation» to denote movements such as Frolinat and Mau Mau? Is that conceptual instrument adequate when applied to the African continent throughout the twentieth century ? That is the central question which the British, Netherlands-based historian and political analyst Stephen Ellis poses in his contribution to the present book. Much of the organised violence of the twentieth century has been interpreted – so Ellis argues – by Africanists as war, and in particular as struggles of resistance or liberation against colonial powers, but also against oppressive postcolonial governments. Analysts find it difficult to understand a new generation of wars, however, which do not easily fit into existing historiographical models. Consideration of these new wars should cause us to reconsider our interpretation of earlier episodes of large scale violence. Ellis's argument implies that the assessment and application of Buijtenhuijs's work will continue in future years, but that in addition we shall have to innovate our conceptual framework beyond the scope habitual in the late twentieth century, when Buijtenhuijs produced his major writings.

A similar invitation to reassessment and to application of established concepts to new and unpredictable situations of the present is contained in the contribution by the Dutch political anthropologist Peter Geschiere. Somewhat underplaying the implied theoretical orientation permeating much of Buijtenhuijs's work, Geschiere argues that Buijtenhuijs explicit and sustained contributions to theory have been limited. Above we suggested that the debunking, rather than the advancement, of theory has been one of Buijtenhuijs's favourite activities over the years. Yet one would not do justice to Buijtenhuijs without trying to ascertain whence this reluctance vis-à-vis theory derived. A probing into his critical and polemical writings would reveal that it is not incapability of theorising that informed Buijtenhuijs's stance, but a soundly suspicious attitude vis-à-vis the production of theory for its own sake, – of theory supported by flimsy and second-hand evidence instead of by the meticulous and laborious carting of innumerable scraps of evidence, carefully and imaginatively pieced together ; it is a scholarly artisan's suspicion of the elitist (and disproportionately highly rewarded) claims of superior insight that is pretended to come with theory. Instead Buijtenhuijs has chosen a hermit's

dedication to the painstaking celebration of a minor, local truth which creative historiography, rather than rigid theoretical political sociology, is capable of revealing and of solidly upholding.

Highly sympathetic and productive as this intellectual stance has proved to be, Geschiere in his contribution probes into some of its shortcomings. Buijtenhuijs's rare theoretical excursions, so Geschiere argues, concerned his disappointment with the all too speedy demise of «le politique par le bas». This was an approach to the study of postcolonial politics in Africa which was launched by his comrades in arms of *Politique africaine* in the early 1980s. Geschiere's contribution focuses on the brief career of one of the notions developed in relation to this approach, notably that of «popular modes of political action». With the help of a few examples from Geschiere's own research on 'witchcraft' and politics in southeast Cameroon, he tries to show that a key-problem of any notion of «popular» is that it supposes some sort of dividing line – often left implicit – between «the people» and an «elite». However, one of the difficulties of the study of politics in Africa – and also one of its most intriguing aspects – is the osmosis between «dominants» and «dominés»: in Africa, what seems to be «popular» to an outside observer often turns out to be associated with the elite on closer inspection. However, the more we come to realise the facts of this osmosis, the more we have to acknowledge – even if it makes the term «popular» ambivalent by definition – that a perspective «from below» has increasingly installed itself at the very heart of the study of African politics today. In this sense Robert Buijtenhuijs's complaints about the demise« of «le politique par le bas» may have a point at the formal level but may turn out to be somewhat unfounded when confronted with the substance of current research into African politics.

Geschiere continues to point out that the whole issue has more general implications. The search for clear counterpoints in African politics against authoritarian state regimes – a search that has marked much of African Studies over the last decades – may reflect a particular political configuration in the West, in which politics could be said to be dominated by the opposition between clear-cut ideological alternatives. However, with the increasing dominance of «the market» over politics in the West, and with the concomitant narrowing of the scope for policy choices, such a configuration (politics as an arena of opposed ideologies) seems more and more a thing of the past. Certain characteristics of African politics – emphasis on personal appeal, the central role of particularistic identities, the far-flung spread of clientelist networks – seem to fit quite well such a «de-ideologisation» of politics, even in the North Atlantic region today. Geschiere ends by asking himself whether this means that Africa may well feature as an example of where the West is going to? Robert Buijtenhuijs's work offers intriguing suggestions on this point.

A somewhat similar dialogue and partial reassessment of the work of Robert Buijtenhuijs is pursued in the contribution by the French political anthropologist Jean Copans. In his article whose French title might be

rendered in English as : “When self-proclaimed naïvety hits the war path leading to national liberation : Is anthropology inherently anti-imperialist ?”, Jean Copans attempts to probe behind the intellectual stance which Robert Buijtenhuijs has assumed over the decades. Repeatedly, although always from a fresh perspective, Robert Buijtenhuijs has intervened for more than thirty years in the discussion on the relations between anthropology and colonialism (or imperialism). Copans reviews over twenty articles or chapters by Robert Buijtenhuijs, more than half of which bear explicitly on this theme. He reminds us of the personal position-taking which has led, in Buijtenhuijs, to the study, both of the Kenyan Mau Mau movement, and of the counter-insurgency research conducted by colonial anthropologists in the wake of Mau Mau. This scholarly interest on Buijtenhuijs's part was subsequently reinforced by the study of the Frolinat guerrilla and of the democratic transition process in Chad. We must situate Robert Buijtenhuijs's reflections in the context of a more global inquiry into the nature of revolutionary elites and revolutionary leaders, as well as on the historical and sociological meaning to be attributed to revolutionaries and revolutions in the Third World. This has in particular brought Buijtenhuijs to critically review some of the hypotheses of G. Balandier and J.-F. Bayart. Yet Copans argues that a careful examination of the writings of Buijtenhuijs shows, in his very reflections on an anthropology committed to liberation, a personal development which has been somewhat solitary. His evolution does not seem to have taken into account new types of ethnical considerations, nor the post-modern nature of the object of study of the discipline of contemporary history in Africa. Even so, Buijtenhuijs's remaining strictly faithful, as an anthropologist, to the primary principles of commitment cannot fail to command our respect in this time when this discipline increasingly seeks to distance itself from historical reflection on the socio-political processes that constitute the modern world in general.

The second major field of Robert Buijtenhuijs's research had emerged organically from his work on peasant wars and revolutions : the consolidation of political relations in the course of the transformations following armed conflict. This logical development from his earlier interest merged with the resurgence, on the African continent, of democratic movements in the wake of the demise of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, after 1989. In the early 1990s Robert Buijtenhuijs initiated, at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, library research on the fast growing literature on democratisation in Africa, and his books on the topic (one co-authored with Elly Rijnierse, another with Céline Thiriot) are among the best-sellers of that institution's printed output.

The Dutch political scientist Martin Doornbos in his contribution to this volume raises the question as to when it may be considered appropriate to speak (again) of a state with reference to new political entities that may be emerging from amongst the debris of collapsed states in Africa or elsewhere. The example which Doornbos takes for closer interrogation is

that of Puntland, situated in the Northeast of the former Somali Republic, which as of 1998 has taken some important constitutional and administrative steps towards establishing statehood. The analysis draws largely on recent processes of policy deliberation within Puntland society, which were intended to facilitate a renewed orientation on priorities for reconstruction and development.

Of course, democracy and democratisation are among the principal priorities in such societal and political reconstruction. The next three contributions address this topic in detail.

The Dutch Ph.D. candidate in international relations, Elly Rijniere, collaborated with Robert Buijtenhuijs on a study of the democratic phenomenon in the African context. This has brought her to distinguish three specific forms of democracy : consensus democracy, representative democracy and reflexive democracy. These types of democracy are claimed to belong to three different types of social structure : pre-modernity, modernity and contemporaneity. These three types of social structure are conceived by Rijniere as primary, to be compared with the primary colours red, yellow and blue, within the total range of the solar spectrum. She seeks to demonstrate how social structures, in Africa as in Europe, may be understood as composed of primary social structures. On the basis of the artistic experiments of Brian Eno, Rijniere suggests that the democratic phenomenon may be better understood on the basis of complexity theory. This theory, it is argued, coincides with the "cosmopolitan project", which serves as a holistic theory of globalisation.

After this exercise in theory building, the contribution by the Dutch political sociologist Piet Konings remains firmly rooted in empirical African institutional reality. Konings's study tries to fill one of the conspicuous lacunae in the growing body of literature on the democratisation process in Africa : the role of trade unions. On the basis of a comparative study of three countries – Zambia, Ghana and Cameroon – Konings comes to the conclusion that the role of trade unions in the African democratic transition process has been more complex than both pessimistic and optimistic schools of thought would like us to believe. Konings's case-studies suggest a large variation in the unions' role, depending not only on such factors as their organisational strength and their previous relations to the state, but also on their willingness to engage directly in the creation of formal democracy, in particular in the form of a multi-party system. Having become painfully aware from past experience that any close alliance of trade unions with political movements and parties could eventually be harmful to the representation of workers' interests, African trade union leaders have increasingly become inclined to stay aloof from the struggle for the introduction of formal democracy. They instead prefer to fight for trade union autonomy vis-à-vis the state, and for a larger measure of trade union participation in the national decision-making process, which they perceive as essential preconditions for the defence of workers' interests and the development of a democratic culture in society.

The French political scientist, Céline Thiriot, has worked with Robert Buijtenhuijs on an analysis of the literature about the democratic process in Sub-Saharan Africa during the period 1992-1995. Her contribution to our reader is based upon a recently completed thesis on the role of the military in the democratic transition in Sub-Saharan Africa. The role of the military is difficult to analyse ; especially because it is both an institutional and political actor. The military is a peculiar institution because of its receptivity to the social, economic and ethno-regional cleavages. Therefore, the democratic transition, which by definition must include a demilitarization of power, is difficult to achieve. Finally when considering the omnipresence of the military in the life of these countries, one can ask if the necessary conditions exist for the military to retreat from political power. One can also ask if these countries do not still remain under a conditional form of military control.

A third important, though often less conspicuous, strand in Robert Buijtenhuijs's work has been the attention to cultural, symbolic, especially religious dimensions of the political processes and conflicts on which his revolutionary studies have concentrated. From Mau Mau as a possible transformation of time-honoured forms of oath-taking, to the possible contributions of Christian churches to primary resistance movements on the African continent, and to the Christian and Muslim strands informing the two sides of the Chadian conflict, Robert Buijtenhuijs has repeatedly and extensively written on the religious dimension of political phenomena, and their possible interpretation. It is therefore fitting that this collection should include two contributions highlighting some of the relations between politics, the occult, and organised religion, on the African continent today.

With his challenging essay on human sacrifice, the Togolese Comi Toulabor approaches a subject which has for a long time been surrounded not only by an embarrassed silence but even by considerable amount of self-censorship on the part of Africanist researchers sufficiently close to contemporary African realities to know what was going on in the corridors of national, regional and local power. Under the presently prevailing politics of knowledge surrounding African Studies, a contribution like this could only have been written and published by an African researcher of sufficiently recognised standing. As editors, we do recognise the importance of studies such as this, but at the same time we can only concur with the author's insistence on the paucity of evidence and on the potentially damaging impact of such studies on the already highly negative image of African people and societies in the contemporary world.

In many African post-colonies such as Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Chad, Togo or ex-Zaire, human sacrifices – so Toulabor claims – are practised in the political circles that hold current state power. Such human sacrifices may be votive, propitiatory or expiatory. According to local beliefs they constitute the most precious gift which the individual could offer to a deity in exchange for benefits which are highly

coveted. If and when the victims are themselves personalities on the political scene, these human sacrifices may be disguised as political murders. Why politicians resort to this kind of practices has a number of reasons, including the ambivalent nature of political action : for this is at the same time a source of wealth and a mortal threat. However, the serious scientific study of this phenomenon is rendered difficult because of the fragile nature of the available evidence. Even so, numerous indications point to the reality of human sacrifices in contemporary African states, and give the human conscience a reason for concern. As Toulabor argues, we are at risk of playing into the cards of those cultivating a "negative image of Africa", if we do not break through the wall of silence surrounding these practices, and do not begin to subject them to scientific discussion.

Not occult practices (although these do come in towards the end) but organised Christianity as a factor of urban social and political control at the level of local urban wards constitutes the topic of the final contribution, by the Dutch anthropologist and philosopher Wim van Binsbergen. The study of African urbanism as distinct from urbanisation gained impetus in the 1970s, stressing a way of life that was increasingly following a dynamic of its own and for whose sociological treatment it was no longer meaningful to take the rural areas, their world-view and kinship patterns, as major reference points. The present argument addresses the emergent patterns of social control that informed family and marital life in Lusaka in the early 1970s. Applying a familiar format in the context of Zambian urban studies, the paper starts out with a detailed presentation of relatively unprocessed material focusing on just one urban protagonist. The subsequent analysis of this material reveals the contribution to urban social control, not only of formal, urban Christian religious organisation (which thus, using a term once dear to Robert Buijtenhuijs, appears as "a place to feel at home"), but also of rural-derived patterns of kin intervention, support, conflict, and witchcraft.

Overlooking the range of contributions and contributors in the present book, one can only be impressed by the scope and the depth of Robert Buijtenhuijs's scholarship, and by the impact it has had over the decades, both in African political practice and in international Africanist scholarship. Yet we have known him as a most humble and simple person, who has combined a monk-like dedication to research and writing with a desire of inconspicuousness, invisibility almost, in public academic settings. Quite early in his career his method of writing had been perfected to the extent that, after two or three years of meticulous data collection, filling numerous small envelopes (carefully ordered inside a carton shoebox) with even far more numerous little notes (often mere shreds of paper such as the blank margins torn from local newspapers), he would seclude himself for six weeks and emerge with the almost perfect draft of a new magnum opus. Against such skill, electronic data bases, computerised word processing, even typing, could mean no improvement, and were contemptuously brushed aside. In the same world of a concentrated quest for data and their representation, theory

was at best a Wittgensteinian ladder to cast away after having allowed part of the argument to rise to a certain level of state-of-the-art sophistication. The facts of African politics and contestation could very well speak for themselves. Or, could they ?

For the frontispiece illustration of this book we have selected a 1997 picture which brings out the Robert Buijtenhuijs as he may most of all like to be remembered : a man who, despite his achievements, does not make himself larger than he knows to be, and who with respect and acknowledgement cherishes the inspiration of what to him have been the giants of the field of African political studies – here represented by Basil Davidson, towards whom Robert Buijtenhuijs has felt the unqualified admiration shared by many members of his generation and radical political persuasion. Little does the picture suggest that Robert has deserved for himself a place of honour in the very midst of those he admired most.