

Pre-Colonial Africa

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Alex Horne

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Thomson presents two important elements of pre-Colonial African society and politics: the non-hegemonic state and kinship networks. The non-hegemonic state arose because there was no need to construct European style leviathanic states on a continent where land was abundant but labour was scarce; while some empires did exist, such as in Mali, they arose in places where there was enough agricultural or economic surplus through trade to justify the creation of a centralised state.

Kinship and clan-splintering played a complimentary role to the non-hegemonic state. Since it was simple enough to simply 'escape' from the dominion of one set of tribal elders and begin a new tribe, it occurred often as the Bantu peoples migrated south and eastward. The reciprocal relationship between kin regulated social relations without the presence of a hegemonic state. Ancestor worship and belief in creator gods went hand in hand as a result.

So while Africa lacked entrenched state institutions, it would be incorrect to say it was a lawless society or backwards. Its institutions were simply alien to the minds of Europeans when they first arrived, who took the absence of Westphalian sovereign states as evidence that Africa was uncivilised.

Even though the intense colonisation period lasted less than a century for many regions of Africa, the influence of kinship and non-hegemonic governance remains, despite the lasting trauma of European imperialism.