

# Egalitarian Revolution in the Savanna

The Origins of a West African Political System

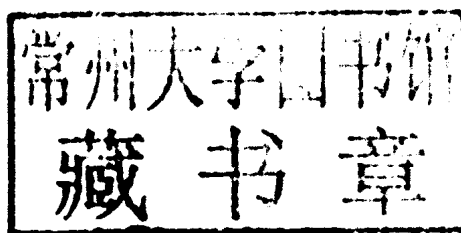


Stephen A. Dueppen

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# **Egalitarian Revolution in the Savanna**

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**Stephen A. Dueppen**

To my parents,  
Kenneth and Mary Ann,  
and to Daphne

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# **Egalitarian Revolution in the Savanna**



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# Decentralization and the Evolution of Egalitarian Behaviors in Sedentary Societies

West Africa is home to myriad small and large-scale societies with non-centralized political systems. While a substantial ethnographic record describes the intricate balances of power and authority in such systems, their developmental trajectories are largely unknown owing to the lack of historical documentation and archaeological investigation. Given this gap in historical context, a great many assumptions and doubts exist in regards to the utility of the region's ethnographic observations to world-wide archaeological and anthropological models. In this book I explore the long-term developmental trajectory of an ancient community (Kirikongo (Figure 1.1)) ancestral to the modern Bwa, who inhabit remarkably complex autonomous villages with extensive social differentiation despite a strong ethos of egalitarianism. Through the presentation of empirical data I argue that many of the characteristics of modern and colonial period African societies that have been seen by some as

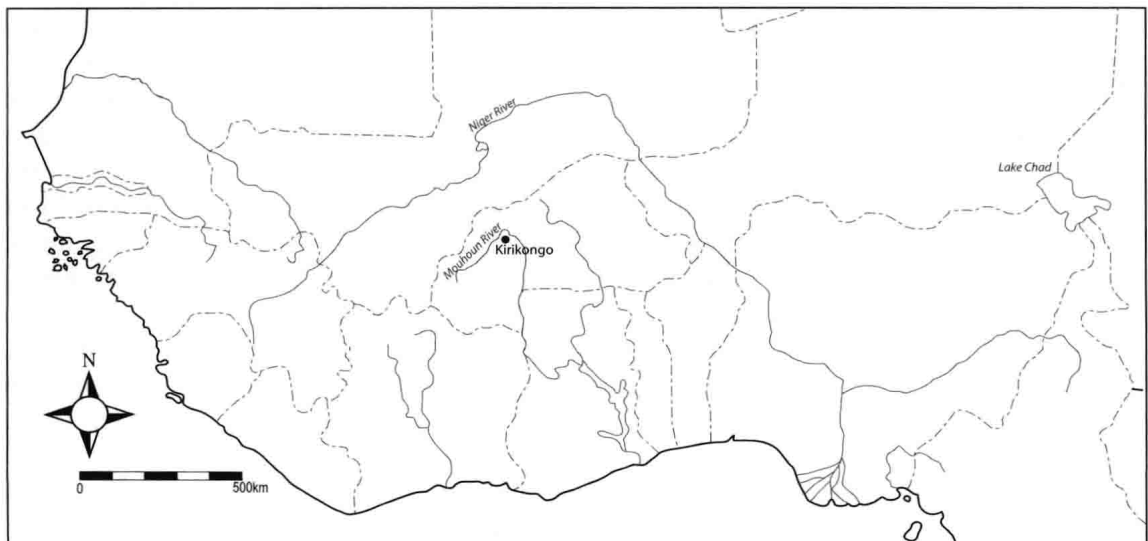


Figure 1.1 Kirikongo, Burkina Faso

devolved social systems disrupted by the slave trade and colonial practices may in fact be the end results of highly complex political histories. In particular, I suggest that the political organizations of many West African societies are derived from long histories of negotiations between social segments (including popular collective actions and revolutions), which have led to the development of diverse social contracts. At Kirikongo, the political actions of several constituencies over time resulted in a trajectory where inequalities were rejected altogether in favor of a reinvented egalitarianism, but similar processes have likely contributed to the formation of the myriad ethnographic and historically known polities in the region where the power of elites was constrained.

### **Political Strategies**

In the western political trajectory (documented since classical Greece), polities have ranged greatly from time to time and place to place in the degree to which political power was centralized in the hands of the few, or more widely distributed throughout society. Consequently, an enduring debate in western political philosophy, and one that lies under the surface of many anthropological theories, is whether legitimate leaders rule based upon the consent of the governed, or rather impose order upon the people. Political philosophers and social evolutionary theorists since the enlightenment have themselves varied greatly in the relative weight they have given to centralization in the hands of the few (including despotism) and majority rule in explaining social change. However, in modern anthropological discourses on social evolutionism, primarily building from data on non-western societies, scholars have tended (though not exclusively) to view increasing complexity as the result of processes of domination rather than consent. Consequently, while decentralized political systems are historically common throughout the globe, there is a tendency to view more representational forms of government as a largely western phenomenon, with peaks during certain time periods (e.g. Classical Greece, Republican Rome, the Enlightenment).

Modern concepts of majority rule were heavily influenced by enlightenment scholars such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. While significantly differing in the relative attribution of power and authority accorded to leaders, including the legitimate use of force, these philosophers all viewed government (the state) as ultimately derivative of the consent of the governed. Hobbes (1985 [1651]) advocated for a highly centralized form of leadership in the state (sovereign—the Leviathan) that would help individuals to avoid reverting to their brutish tendencies (the state of nature). However, even his somewhat despotic model for civil society allowed for flexibility in the nature of leadership, including either a monarchy or permanent assembly government. Locke (1967 [1698]) agreed with Hobbes that government (civil society) must be established by individuals within a society to mediate their selfishness, but he differed in believing that human nature was characterized by a more optimistic concept of reason. Unlike Hobbes' view of the dangers of questioning the sovereign after the people have ceded power to the state, Locke advocated for revolution as a mechanism of social change, and a fundamental right (even an obligation) when leaders fail to ensure an individual's life, health, liberty or possessions. Also unlike Hobbes who feared religion and alternative nodes of power when not controlled by the state, Locke believed in a separation of powers (or decentralization), because of the potential for abuse. Rousseau (1997 [1755], 1962 [1762]) largely rejected Hobbes claim that mankind must choose between being free and



being ruled, and focused his works upon legitimacy in government, that is a balance between maintenance of individual freedom and citizenship (obligation). He claimed that majority rule could enable freedom, since humanity can be free if it rules itself (if the population constructs the laws that they obey). He differed from both Locke and Hobbes in asserting that sovereignty comes from the people and must stay there, while the others suggest that a transfer of sovereignty must take place, from the people to the ruler.

Perhaps because majority rule has been difficult to maintain even in the western political trajectory, much of evolutionary theory in anthropology is within an intellectual tradition that shares a common assumption that political complexity is derived from histories of dominance and manipulation of the masses by elites, and not derived from the consent of the governed. The evolutionary theories of Spencer (1893, 1896), Morgan (1985 [1877]), White (1959), and Fried (1967—particularly regarding the rise of stratification), while differing in significant ways, can generally be grouped within this intellectual tradition. Marx and Engels' (e.g. Engels 1942 [1884]) models of social evolution prior to the projected post-capitalist revolution are similarly based upon the increasing dominance of the ruling class in exploitation of material wealth (derived from surplus production) and motivated by greed and ambition (self-interest). Archaeological models have historically tended to view increasing complexity as derived from political manipulation and domination, from the groundbreaking work of Childe (1936), and continuing today (e.g.; Hayden 1995b). The widespread application of Melanesian big-man and aggrandizement models (whether entrepreneurial or despotic—see Lemonnier 1990) is generally representative of this stance.

Models based upon the consent of the governed have been historically less influential in the archaeological study of social complexity, despite their foundational role in relation to modern democracy, and heavy influence in western political history. However, the evolutionary theories of Service (1975) better fit within this intellectual tradition, as he focused upon leveling mechanisms and sodalities in egalitarian societies, and had great difficulty understanding how leaders in chiefdoms and states could dominate their subjects unless they provided important returns to them (see for example, pp. xi–xix; see also critiques of Service's stance by Fried 1978). In other words, the populace allowed elites to rule because they were necessary to the communal well-being, and Service viewed the repressive states described by Morgan, Marx, and Engels as unrealistic. As will be seen below, a very recent trend in archaeological research has been the inclusion of models taking into account processes of corporate political strategies, communalism, egalitarian behaviors, and agency of more diverse social segments and constituencies. These generally fit better within a stance incorporating a political philosophy based upon consent of the governed, and provide a basis for studying the origins and development of societies with more dispersed arrangements of power, and/or more representational political systems.

While a wide variety of highly centralized, sometimes despotic political systems have clearly existed historically and prehistorically, social trajectories have likely varied significantly due to social movements advocating more representational governmental forms. Throughout this chapter I will explore how models of centralization based upon self-aggrandizement and despotic power arrangements have generally provided a poor explanatory framework for many African social systems. In particular, I wish to call attention to the transformative power of the consent of the governed to the political organization of past societies. I suggest that both historically and in our archaeological case study, leaders and