AFRICAN CONFLICTS AND INFORMAL POWER

BIG MEN AND NETWORKS

EDITED BY
MATS UTAS

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African conflicts and informal power

Big Men and networks

edited by Mats Utas

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Introduction: Bigmanity and network governance in African conflicts

Mats Utas

This volume invites comparisons across the African continent by presenting case studies from a variety of countries, settings and institutions with one factor in common: armed conflict.[1] The chapters that follow refer to socio-political or economic networks along a continuum from formal and open to informal and at times even illicit.[2] It has been argued that networks will rise to prominence where formal states, or other sovereign entities, are fractured, weak or barely present (Reno 1998). Informal networks of political or economic character are present in any society, whether in Africa, Europe, North America or elsewhere. The politics of intimacy, or 'the culture of intimacy', as Herzfeld (1997) would have it, is part of the everyday life of nation-states where every institution is governed by onstage and offstage politics (Shryock 2004; Goffman 1959). It is the inner workings of politics and the ever-present backrooms to the official storefronts of political and economic ventures which are central in this volume. A second theme running through the book concerns the role of Big Men, informal political and/or economic actors situated in social space.[3] Big Men will be treated here as nodes in networks, combining efforts in projects of joint action. Joint action may be economic or political, and could for instance be a war effort.

The combination of Big Men and networks is not an African phenomenon, but rather a very human enterprise. Works concerned with African neo-patrimonialism, clientelism and patron–client systems are many, but I intend in this introduction to approach from a somewhat different angle by fusing classic network studies with Big Men/Great Men research originating from Melanesia (e.g. Sahlins 1963; Godelier 1986; Godelier and Strathern 1991). The term is, furthermore, used emically; for instance, in Sierra Leone people constantly refer to Big Men and their ways of acting, systematically relating to who is, and who is not, a Big Man in all social settings.

Early in *For the City Yet to Come* (2004b), AbdouMaliq Simone notes that when working with NGOs in urban Africa, he was always bewildered that staff seldom appeared to be doing what they were hired to do; instead, the work that was in fact achieved was described as being done somewhere else. In his quest for locating this 'somewhere else', Simone notes that by engaging with these organizations 'over an extended period of time, it became clear that there were other, more provisional and ephemeral, forms of ... collective activity that association members also participated in and that seemingly had a greater impact on their life' (ibid.: 24). This is what Chabal and Daloz, although from slightly different vantage points and reaching somewhat different conclusions, talk about as *Africa Works* (1999). But in zones of conflict and war, where everything is in flux, the inner workings of 'order' are even more intricate. War in Africa does not imply the collapse of everything, a venturing into total anarchy. Alternative forms of control and management establish themselves when formal governance is diminished. These may be in the guise of rebel movements and militias, often mimicking the formal, or of more fluid forms of network. Two examples from the first war in Liberia and the early period of the war in Somalia highlight this point. The currency in the so-called greater Liberia, Charles Taylor and NPFL territory, maintained twice the value of the new, official Liberian currency introduced early in the war. By issuing a new currency and upholding a ban on trading in the old, the interim government and the international community had intended to starve Taylor and the NPFL out but, owing to informal structures of governance within greater Liberia, the result turned into the opposite. A second, related example is the way in which Somalia, without state or central bank, maintained a relatively stable currency during the first part of the war. This was possible, Peter Little (2003) remarks, because of networks of money-changers and informal finance houses. These examples demonstrate how other, and alternative, power structures maintain a degree of order in conflict zones. In fact, conflict opens up space for new alternative political and economic structures that reach far beyond the conflict zone itself, as in this recent example from Somalia:

> Somali networks criss-cross the Horn of Africa and, as states in East Africa seek to develop economic links, their experience shows that such links already exist, at least informally. Finance from Mogadishu, distribution networks fanning out from Nairobi and agents across the region paint the picture of an increasingly connected economy. The clan- and family-based nature of Somali business networks means that there is ample scope for developing new markets and connections wherever Somali communities are present. It must also be noted that Somali networks extend into Europe, North America, the Gulf states and beyond, demonstrating the continuing connectedness of this widely dispersed community. (Abdulsamed 2011: 15)

The African state and other forms of governance

There is already a considerable state-centric literature on conflicts and other outcomes of the crisis of the post-colonial Westphalian state in Africa, whether labelled failed, collapsed, weak or fragile (see, among many others, Bøås and

Dunn 2007; Bayart et al. 1999; Duffield 2001; Kaldor 1999; Reno 1995, 1998; Andersen et al. 2007; Chabal and Daloz 1999). Although many of the chapters in this volume discuss this, in this introduction I avoid such discussions. Suffice it to say that weak African states have opened up space for alternative sources of sovereignty (Hansen and Stepputat 2005) and alternative forms of governance (Utas 2009), as well as allowing ample room for violent contestations over the state in the form of military coups and armed incursions (Biró 2007; Reno 1998; Bøås and Dunn 2007; Clapham 1998). One could argue that most African states have never been more than nominally sovereign and that weak states have necessitated considerable use of violence (Mbembe 2001, 2003; Utas 2009) as well as rhizomically informal and alternative, although not necessarily opposing, structures of governance (Bayart 1993). It is essential to point out that state and civil society are intricately interconnected and interwoven and cannot be understood in opposition to each other. Neither state nor civil society is democratic in its basic set-up. The state in many African countries, Ferguson points out, 'starts to look suspiciously like civil society' (2006: 99), and civil society appears as a number of political entities, or integrated 'parts of a new, transnational apparatus of governmentality' (ibid.: 103).[4] These political entities do not replace nation-states and national governance but overlay them and coexist.

Citizens in many African states – states in the Westphalian Periphery (Biró 2007) – have an ambivalent relationship with the state. AbdouMaliq Simone remarks that in Senegal 'many urban dwellers will come to feel locked in by the frequently overbearing demands of these practices and institutions' (Simone 2004b: 36). From a predominantly economic perspective he notes that unconventional trade, involving well-off business persons, soldiers, militias, middlemen of various nationalities and petty traders, is most common within states where chronic political crisis has undermined state regulations and where civil servants in formal institutions continue to function and maintain some control by their very activities in informal trade (ibid.: 25).[5] The informal logic of daily life rests on what Simone calls 'the spectral order of things' (ibid.: 92ff.), a politico-economic blending, or a *métissage* of relations penetrating society so thoroughly that, for instance, the regime that has ruled Cameroon for the last twenty years 'increasingly recognizes that it need no longer substantially invest in the definitional aspects of rule – that is, to deliberate clearly defined jurisdictions, zones, policies, and sectors' (ibid.: 94b). The spectral order of things is deemed more efficient and possibly the only viable path.

Simone, along with many other observers, locates such 'failures' in historic perspectives and points out that, in order to make colonies productive, the objective of colonizing states was 'to access labor without encouraging wage labor' (ibid.: 144). In Central Africa it was frequently concessionary companies which carried administrative costs, leading towards more businesslike state formations. Local order was disrupted in order to intensify authoritarian control, with the effect of '[a] loosening of the population from its former social and political ties ... giving rise to populations accountable to no one' (ibid.: 145). Polities, Simone further states, became 'largely based on "big man" systems operating more as commercial firms than as states' (ibid.). This gives us a glimpse of the roots of Big Men networks, made possible, if not necessary, by political changes on the continent as a partial consequence of colonialism and related politico-economic endeavours of conquest.[6]

According to Alex de Waal, the most complicated conflicts in the contemporary world are found in countries where state institutions are subordinate to patronage networks. Without denying the fact that citizens care about political issues and do fight over them, he states that people 'can neither organize their political allegiances through rule-governed organizations nor resolve them through state institutions according to the rule of law' (de Waal 2009: 99). In his view, political life in most African countries is organized as 'a patrimonial marketplace', operating according to socioculturally established conventions. Depending on the perspective of the viewer, the result can be described both as 'state failure/fragility and as an alternative way in which countries can function' (ibid.).

De Waal takes his cue from Samuel Huntington, who some forty years ago pointed out that '[t]he most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government' (ibid.). In this light, it is formal organizational voids which are crucial, not differences in socioculture per se. At this point, one could question de Waal's cultural use of neo-patrimonialism, given his reference to Huntington's structural and thus universally valid perspective. According to de Waal,

> [u]nder such systems, some insist that 'Africa works' and will continue to do so. This strand of thought does not deny that people, including political leaders, hold strong political beliefs. It is just that the vehicles available to promote these political agendas, such as political parties, legislatures and government ministries, operate according to socio-cultural rules, notably patrimonialism. (De Waal 2009: 101)

But why socioculture? Have all countries with weak states the same sociocultural traits? De Waal ends up with many of the same problems as Bratton and van de Walle, for whom neo-patrimonialism is 'the distinctive institutional hallmark of African regimes' (Bratton and van de Walle in Mkandawire 2002: 184), where 'neopatrimonial regimes [are] ... embedded in *precapitalist* societies' (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 89).[7] By contrast, we see Big Men and networks of governance not as sociocultural features but rather as socio-structural ones, where certain structural features prescribe certain social outcomes. Naturally, networks are social and cultural manifestations as much as they are political and economic (as Roitman points out in Duffield 2002: 160), but such manifestations differ from setting to setting. To reiterate: with weak or absent state institutions the structural alternative is more influential and stronger informal networks governance, whether in Liberia, Italy or the United States. For instance, organized criminals are connected with governance structures and formal private enterprises in every country, but the structural void created during armed conflict and war increases the space for such nodes. Yet informal Big Man networks are far from just criminal, as I argue below.

Many Africans remain sceptical about their own state; some are downright hostile. Are they citizens or subjects (Mamdani 1996), or neither (Fanthorpe 2001)? On the African continent, new groups rage against the machine (Bøås and Dunn 2007), turn abject heroes, antisocial by necessity (Utas 2008a), or just hustle the system (Christensen and Utas 2008; Utas and Jörgel 2008). In Sierra Leone and Liberia, but most recently among the Somali diaspora in Nairobi, I have researched how people affected by war arrange themselves in various local, and chiefly informal, organizations around both social and physical security, protecting themselves in part against the state and emissaries of the state. Frequently they take the form of small-scale and semi-sovereign organizations that tend to mimic the functioning state, but on a micro level. Although they organize themselves in opposition to the state to some extent, both individuals and sometimes entire organizations cultivate extensive ties with civil servants, with rhizomes reaching deep into the centre of the state (as pointed out in this volume; in particular Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 9). Such organizations are urban phenomena, although rhizomes and local cuttings certainly reach into rural areas, in particular into resource-rich mining areas, rural towns and borderlands (see Chapters 1, 2 and 5 in this volume) connected not only to urban but also to global networks (see Chapters 6 and 10).

In what might appear fleetingly, especially to a scholar of government, to be the ruins of urban life, a social infrastructure still exists, says Simone. Such infrastructure facilitates *intersections of socialities* used by citizens who possess limited other means (Simone 2004a: 407). He points out how 'residents' reciprocal efforts are radically open, flexible, and provisional' and thus 'a specific economy of perception and collaborative practice is constituted through the capacity of individuals to circulate across and become familiar with a broad range of spatial, residential, economic, and transactional positions' (ibid.: 408). Simone proposes that we should see people themselves as *infrastructure* (ibid.: 407, 410–11).

It is always possible to do something different with the city, or the state for that matter, from what it is intended for; it is possible to keep the official structure operative, using official space for private entrepreneuring (ibid.: 409). For instance, the minister of aviation in an African country formally prevents illicit goods going through the national airport, but informally uses the same

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structures to facilitate the smuggling of cocaine. Commonplace traders are using an official storefront to sell construction material but double as dealers in so-called blood diamonds, and get a cut from the prolific trade in arms and ammunition destined for a neighbouring country in armed conflict. It is the combination of activities and people which is creating alternative modes of production. Such institutional forms constitute

> highly mobile and provisional possibilities for how people live and make things, how they use the urban environment and collaborate with one another. The specific operations and scopes of these conjunctions are constantly negotiated and depend on the particular histories, understandings, networks, styles, and inclinations of the actors involved. (Ibid.: 410)

It is, in this telling, the reweaving of connections, both local and international, which makes Africa work, and it is these conjunctions and network textures which are of interest in this book, networks that are systems of both 'politics and resource provision' (Simone 2004b: 42). If networks are alternative modes of governance, then Big Men are alternative governors of *peopled infrastructures.*

Big Men

Marshall Sahlins, in an article from 1963, states that '[t]he Melanesian big-man seems so thoroughly bourgeois, so reminiscent of the free enterprising rugged individual of our own heritage. He combines with an ostensible interest in the general welfare a more profound measure of self-interested cunning and economic calculation' (Sahlins 1963: 289). There are a number of characteristics that he attaches to the Big Man, many universally valid and easily adaptable to African scenarios. '[T]he indicative quality of big-man authority', he states,

> is everywhere the same: it is *personal* power. Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract him a coterie of loyal, lesser men. (Ibid.: 289)

The Big Man has the ability to command, to instigate mass action, where authority is not structurally ascribed and socio-historically motivated but based on the Big Man's ability to create a following and to a large extent dependent on his informal abilities to assist people privately. The creation of his own faction is absolutely crucial for his power and standing (ibid.: 290f.), and upward mobility occurs when he connects other men and their families to his faction, 'harnessing their production to his ambition' (ibid.: 292). Building renown and power is based on amassing wealth and redistributing it with 'astutely calculated generosity' (Godelier 1986: 163).

Sahlins asserts the fragility and the temporality of Big Man power, as loyalty must continuously be reinforced and dissatisfaction among followers may have grave consequences for his authority (Sahlins 1963: 292), which leads to what Sahlins calls a 'comparative instability' (ibid.: 293). The death of an important Big Man, for instance, may lead to a regional political 'trauma' as factions are built around a particular Big Man and a whole network may temporarily dissolve, eventually being rebuilt around other Big Men. A further source of instability is what Sahlins calls 'the Melanesian contradiction' (ibid.): economic reciprocity between the Big Man and his followers on one side, but on the other hand there is cumulative build-up of a Big Man that eventually will lead to extortion of the faction (ibid.). There is thus an obvious risk that a Big Man will overburden his followers, leading to 'the generation of antagonisms, defections, and in extreme cases the violent liquidation of the center-man' (ibid.). As Godelier notes, the Big Man is thus 'little by little undermining his social base' (1986: 163). If we take these factors into account, it may for instance help to explain the relative instability of many African rebel movements resting on Big Man/warlord logics.

There will inevitably be regions, or localities, where the idea of who, or what, a Big Man is will differ from the overarching framework. Thus, while we aim to employ the Big Man concept in case studies across the continent, one must expect that the definition given here will fit in some settings better than in others. Médard (1992) has explicitly used Sahlins' Big Man model in exploring African politics, pointing out how African Big Men convert economic resources into political authority (cf. Chapter 7 in this volume) and how state affairs become quintessentially personal (cf. Chapter 8 in this volume). However, other authors focusing on Africa use the term as a rather loose label and in a variety of ways. To give a few examples: in Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania, liminal experts or brokers who operate in the space in between refugees and humanitarian aid agencies such as UNHCR are referred to as Big Men by Simon Turner (2010: 86–7). Johan de Smedt employs the term when discussing election violence and vote manipulation in Kenya's 2007 elections. Highlighting the fact that 'local "big men" exercised authority by sharing out their wealth – the recipients of this redistribution, the poor, then "inevitably owed obedience"' (de Smedt 2009: 583) – he explains how British-created 'tribes' continue to function as political avenues for ethnic patronage that ties local Big Men to the 'ultimate Big Man', the president (ibid.). In his book *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (1995), Paul Nugent situates Big Men of the political arena in open-ended hierarchical relations. 'The "big man" issues commands, normally from a seated position, while subordinates do the running,' states Nugent (ibid.: 3). A Big Man is primarily, but not only, a political figure associated with opulence. Bigness is in part measured in status symbols and the ability to fill that Big Man role according to social criteria. In Ghanaian politics, Big Men 'sought to win over potential voters by insinuating that some of this wealth would rub off on them – either directly (through patronage) or indirectly (because of the application of their business acumen to national affairs)' (ibid.: 5). Despite different usage of the term, Bigmanity can be said to hold a number of key characteristics:

1 Bigmanity is based on social relations. 'A big-man is one who can create and use social relations which give him leverage on others' production,' says Sahlins (1963: 292). Big Men transform social relations into strategic power and control (Médard 1992). Bigmanity forms loose social webs based on the ability to gather followers. In some settings this form of gathering is more important than economic wealth, access to land or formal political power. This has been called 'wealth in people' (Guyer 1993) or a rights-in-person complex (Kopytoff and Miers 1977), or has been linked with the notion of 'being for' someone (Bledsoe 1990; see also Utas 2008a).
2 Big Men do not generally control followers. Quite the opposite; it is in the interest of followers to maintain ties with a Big Man (and it is rarely just one) because Big Men provide economic possibilities as well as protection and social security. Bigmanity is far from mere wealth gathering. Big Men are not merely rational-choice wealth-generating positions; to maintain a Big Man position, one must extend solidarity within a moral framework. Gathering of power and its maintenance are built on forms of reciprocity, and if the Big Man does not distribute enough largesse he will eventually lose his supporters. Bigmanity is unfixed and multiple. Bigmanity is not a matter of inherited patron–client structures, but rather fluid and ever-changeable webs of relations. Some Big Men endure a lifetime at the centre of things while many others come and go. Followers may discard Big Men when they do not deliver. At the same time a follower is not loyal to just one Big Man, but typically enjoys different relationships with different Big Men.
3 Bigmanity is a response to a lack of formal structures. Typically, Big Men wield a great deal of social power in situations where there is a structural void. Big Man power should be seen as an alternative form of governance, where the national state doesn't reach, or where local forms of formal governance do not have sufficient sovereign powers. Formal structures are typically weakened during conflicts which thus give increased room for Bigmanity. Big Men networks may or may not involve the façades of the state. Big Men ought not to be seen as an opposing system to that of the state – quite the contrary. Politicians as well as civil servants use their positions within the state to engage business and cultivate relationships 'based on their role in tendering contracts, issuing licenses, and approving land use plans' (Simone 2004b: 81). The fewer functioning checks and balances there are, the more room there is for the Big Man to manoeuvre.
4 Being a Big Man is not a fixed label but rather a term that highlights a

position within social relations. It implies that a Big Man may well have his own Big Man. Furthermore, 'small' systems of Big Men and followers also occur at the grassroots level of a society (even the boy has his boy). There is a structural tension between the Big Man and 'the small boys', coming to the fore in studies such as Richards (1996) and Jackson (2004), where Big Men aim at controlling the production of their followers and this tension gives rise to the desire of underlings to slip the leash, as well as radicalizing discourses and in some cases sparking revolutionary engagements. Violent conflicts open up possibilities for underlings to contest power and climb the social ladder (Utas 2008a, 2009).

Network

Mark Duffield discusses war as a network enterprise (2002) using Manuel Castells' ideas of the new information society as a basis, when he defines the *network enterprise* as 'the generic institutional expression of the new global/informational economy' (ibid.: 154). He draws conclusions about certain aspects of networks from Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), seeing networks not as oligopolistic, but rather interconnected groups of decentralized components with significant autonomy making room for competition within shared strategies (Duffield 2002: 154). Networks are not primarily concerned with territorial control but aim at 'constructing flexible relations between sets of information-sharing companies in different institutional or spatial environments' (ibid.); thus such networks come to resemble business projects, as we shall see below. New information technologies have played a seminal role in the success of 'the network' in this broader sense. Somalia may be the prime case of a Castellsian war where a diaspora community is directly connected through new media and information flows to friends, family and business community within the war zone itself. Alongside information flows run intricate transfer networks of money, goods and people that in many ways sustain the war (Little 2003; Lindley 2009). However, all African wars do not look the same; the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, for instance, differed substantially from the Somali experience in that new media communication flows played much less of a role.

The idea of the networks often prompts associations of social threat. We tend to think of networks as illicit (see, e.g., Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008). Al-Qaeda is the contemporary example par excellence, with semi-independent cells and terrorist goals. Rhizomic networks with tacit underground derivations make these structures seem the opposite of 'up in the air' information networks, although information hubs and flows are today crucial for illicit activities to prosper. Other 'threatening networks' could be networks of curiously successful Japanese firms in 1980s and 1990s USA (as discussed in Podolny and Page 1998), but also Freemasonry across the world, or secret societies in, for instance, West Africa. Secret society networks such as the Poro in Liberia and Sierra Leone have been obsessively studied. Although the heyday of such study has passed, many have continued to fear the informal powers of societies based on secret networks. A few years ago, I met a UN police officer who was preoccupied with unmasking the members and informal activities of the secret male Poro of Nimba County in rural Liberia, certain that everything damaging that happened in the county had its origin within that secret realm. Elsewhere, examples of 'malevolent' networks that come to mind are drug cartels (see Chapter 6) and economic networks extracting resources in conflict areas (cf. Chapters 1 and 10).

Duffield's study of wars as network enterprises focuses on emerging global rather than local structures. Although the emphasis of this volume is on the latter, there are clear resemblances and also a profound connectedness between a local conflict and global networks, as most chapters in this volume demonstrate. By making Castells' information networks the starting point for his analysis, Duffield, however, implies that network society (and war) is something new, made possible only in and by the information age, but other researchers have at least since the 1950s pointed out the importance of social networks. There is a rich history of network studies starting with Barnes' study of the Norwegian island parish Bremnes, published in 1954 (Barnes 1954). By the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, social anthropologists were anticipating great things from the study of social networks. Hopes were raised that network studies would enhance an understanding of social change (Kapferer 1973: 83). Clearly, the study of networks has since then experienced ups and downs, and researchers continue to consider networks important but hard to pin down with precision. Podolny and Page (1998) point towards a vogue of network studies in organizational economy in the 1990s, where they filled a theoretical void in explaining economic patterns that did not fit the classic duality of market and hierarchy.

Clyde Mitchell (1973; see also Mitchell 1974), in his overview of network studies within social anthropology, identifies Barnes as the first venturing beyond the classic understanding of kin and family networks when he described the social network as 'a set of personal relationships which interfused and crosscut the set of relationships in the industrial [work-related] and territorial [place-related] systems' (Mitchell 1973: 15). Mitchell points out that social class and neighbourhood are typical variables that influence the 'connectedness' of social networks. Such factors are, however, not straight determinants and typically networks cut across villages and across kin- and identity-based groups. Thus the network deviated from (in his words) 'traditional' social systems (ibid.: 17, 21). Although he posits a theoretical differentiation between the boundedness of a social group and the unboundedness of networks, in practice they are interconnected and not easily separated (ibid.: 20).

Quoting Srinivas and Béteille (1964), Mitchell defines a social network as 'a set of concrete individuals who are members of diverse systems of enduring groups and categories' (Mitchell 1973: 21). Srinivas and Béteille look at the network from an actor-centred perspective. Bruce Kapferer, in his work on social networks in Zambia, proposes a similarly actor-centred approach: 'The concept network for my purpose refers to a set of points (individuals) defined in relation to an initial point (ego) and linked by lines (relationships) either directly or indirectly to this initial point of focus' (Kapferer 1973: 84). Mitchell argues that '[f]or a deeper understanding it is necessary not only to chart concrete networks of different individuals but to relate these different networks to one another, to draw up, so to say, a master chart, in a coherent and systematic manner' (Mitchell 1973: 22). But to study networks and relate them to each other is hard enough in a study localized to a neighbourhood (e.g. Kapferer (1973) and Epstein (1961)). The networks of conflict economies with which we are preoccupied in this volume are much wider, ranging over neighbourhoods and cities, into the rural, and over the national and transnational. They frequently, but not always, range into the clandestine, if not illicit. Most assuredly, it is not possible to draw up complete master charts of such complexity. It is a tough enough task to describe temporary nodes, Big Men and how they work and combine efforts for social, political and economic action in the form of joint projects. The very fluidity of conflict networks is an obstacle to any systematic study. Still, we must attempt a shift from 'the subjective network of the actor to the objective one of the observer' (Mitchell 1973: 22), maintaining a suitable degree of humility in taking on this challenge.

Returning to the practical/functional aspect, a network should be 'thought of as the actual set of links of all kinds among a set of individuals' (ibid.: 22). Graphically, the social relationships of individuals in networks are drawn as lines with individuals as connected points, but as Mitchell points out, this is not sufficient, as we need also to observe what kind of relationship every single line stands for (ibid.: 23) – is it a political tie, an economic relationship, or both? To add to the complexity, not all ties remain the same over time. Ultimately we must also identify the nodes/Big Men and take into account their multiple roles in addition to the plethora of links they maintain. Adrian Mayer (1966), for instance, studied 'action sets' in elections, tracing sets of offers of services that were exchanged for support during an election (Mitchell 1973: 25). Voters were connected to political candidates through expectations of patronage. Mayer observed thirty-eight links between a particular candidate and voters. Ten of them were kinship based, seven were economic links, four were caste based and the rest had other characteristics: 'the state, the wrestling club, trade union membership, occupational links, village links and so on'. Mitchell points out that Mayer's study involved three kinds of network: the exchange network, a communications network and a social network (ibid.: 25).

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