

ABSTRACT

DECENTRALISATION AND STATE FORMATION IN RURAL MALAWI

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Throughout the world diverse countries are implementing decentralization as a strategy for both democracy and development. While the assumed benefits of this orthodoxy have been well theorised, not much attention has been given to examining the actual politics and the extent to which it contributes to processes of state formation in Sub-Saharan African countries. State formation broadly refers to the development of the basic structures of the state at all levels of society and the political, economic, social and cultural structures through which it is articulated. It deals with a broader issue of the relationship between the state and local communities and it reflects on a regime's efforts to forge institutional mechanisms to and political alliances to govern and tax localities (Boone, 1998). In this context, decentralization is believed to contribute to state formation processes through the devolution of power to the lowest unit of society facilitating local government's pursuit with the central state for a new shape of the state.

Drawing from the historical literature and insights from qualitative field work that was carried out in a number of Malawian rural districts, this paper looks at how various colonial and postcolonial regimes reconfigured and bolstered state sanctioned political authority at the local level. Next, the paper examines the structuring and functioning of institutional arrangements linking the state and the localities following the implementation of democratic decentralization in Malawi and how they have shaped the nature of the state. The paper argues that political dynamics at the national level, weak civil society organisations and mechanisms of popular participation at the local level combined with the presence of strong traditional local power holders have influenced regime efforts to forge decentralised institutional mechanisms and political alliances that have emphasised the heavy presence of the central state at the local level. It highlights the extent to which decentralization has facilitated different access points for colonial and postcolonial regimes that have sought to extend state power to the rural peripheral. Thus, central state authority and hegemony have been constituted through fusions of state power with societal based forms of power, some of which are embedded in the rural life. These observations question the underlying wisdom in conventional discussions of democratic decentralization that tends to assume that regimes are free and willing to reconstruct central-local relations in accordance with a policy decision made at the top and that local communities will rise together to embrace their new found political autonomy. The paper concludes by drawing out implications these observations may have on democracy consolidation in Malawi.