



Postcolonial Africa and its Lotteries

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Over the last twenty years, a growing body of work on the decolonization of Africa has focused on leisure activities, and particularly on the ways in which these activities mark growing inequalities (Grundlingh, 2003, pp. 174-189) and define postcolonial identities, citizenship, bodies and morality (Besnier, Brownell & Carter, 2017, pp. 39-70; Diouf, 2003, pp. 1-12; Wagg, 2005). As several scholars have also shown, religious activities (Marshall, 2009) as well as sports and cultural clubs (Diouf, 2003, p. 8) in postcolonial Africa often threaten the postcolonial state's political and moral order. Surprisingly, given the pervasiveness of both gambling and state lotteries on the continent, very little research has been done on postcolonial state lotteries in Africa.

On one level, this is perhaps not that surprising given that state lotteries in Africa fit awkwardly into the category of leisure; unlike the Brazilian "animal game", a popular, long-standing lottery in which punters engage in elaborate social rituals and draw on extensive symbolism (DaMatta & Soárez, 1999), lotteries in Africa take on standardized forms, are mechanized through lottery terminals, and rely on rather perfunctory individualized play. Even as a form of gambling, state lotteries lack the frisson of high-stakes poker, the glamour of casinos, the cultural weight of indigenous games, or the immediacy of slot machines. But on another level, the lacuna of research on state lotteries in postcolonial Africa is surprising given their ubiquity and their long histories, preceding the (re)legalization of state lotteries¹ in the Global North. While the [USA's Powerball](#) had its origins in 1988 in the multi-state game known as [Lotto America](#), the [UK's national lottery](#) held its first draw in November 1994, and [EuroMillions](#) was launched in February 2004, most African lotteries were launched shortly before and after independence. Thus, [Zambia's lottery](#) was established in the 1950s,² the Ghanaian lottery in 1958 (Aflakpui, 2016, p. 3), the [Ethiopian lottery](#) in 1961, the [Moroccan lottery](#) in 1962, Senegal's (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet 1996, p. 155) and Kenya's (Louw, 2017, p. 110) lotteries in 1966, Uganda's lottery in 1968 (Louw, 2017, p. 110) and Cameroon's lottery in 1972 (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet 1996, p. 154).

Apart from their historical pedigrees and abundance, state lotteries in Africa are singular institutions; their rules, constitutions and governance are subject to government legislation and oversight while they play a key fiscal role in many postcolonial economies. Since few postcolonial states had efficient tax systems in place at independence, lotteries presented an efficient and politically painless 'soft'

¹ Historians trace the first state lottery to the Hun Dynasty in China in 100 BCE while modern versions of state lotteries are often traced back to the 1434 lottery in Holland, and then to the continuous lotteries that ran in Italy, France and England from the 1530s onwards to pay for public services, royal expenditures, public works and wars (Bobbitt, 2007, pp. 1-2).

² Zambia gained independence from the UK in 1964, but laws relating to gambling were relaxed in the 1950s.



source of revenue (Brenner & Servet, 1995, p. 48). And while scholars have typified the public performances of postcolonial African governments as alienating, violent spectacles of power (Bayart, 1989; Mbembe, 1992), their lotteries had a very different public face. Across the continent, lotteries peddle their impossible dreams in technicolor on larger-than-life billboards, at every bus stop and in the windows of every corner shop. These advertisements are in the register of the familiar non-threatening world of consumer goods precisely because the state has to woo, rather than threaten or coerce, vast numbers of citizens to participate in their enterprise; as both punters and independent lottery sellers. The regularity and predictability of state lotteries' weekly, bi-weekly and sometimes daily draws on television and on radio are also easily slotted into domestic cycles of eating meals and socializing with friends and family. It is this intimacy between postcolonial states and their citizen punters that make state lotteries an interesting vantage point from which to look at postcolonial states.

Politically, the turn to state lotteries marked an important statement by many newly independent African countries about dignity, citizenship and governance. Dignity is perhaps an unexpected word to use in conjunction with state lotteries, but in Africa, the restriction and control of gambling during colonialism went hand-in-hand with a number of sumptuary laws³ intended to control African social life (Louw, 2017, p. 111) and underscore class and racial differentiation (Ross, 1999). One case exemplifies the racialized nature of gambling legislation in many former colonies. Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) first legalized gambling on horse racing in 1914 but prohibited turf clubs from accepting bets from children and 'Africans' (Roberts, 2007, pp. 12-130). In 1935, the colonial government launched a state lottery but only allowed 'Africans' to play from 1959 onwards (Roberts, 2007, p. 14).⁴ In other colonies, this kind of racist legislation was only lifted after independence and by all indications, was something that most new citizens welcomed as they eagerly participated in state lotteries. Where new democratic governments tried to 'protect' their poor citizens from gambling, as the South African government's Department of Social Welfare threatened to do in the late 1990s, citizen groups objected that this would trample on their "human rights".⁵ In the light of exclusionary and racist colonial (and apartheid) gambling legislation, these were statements about dignity and citizenship.

Hand-in-hand with these lofty political statements, state lotteries also presented new elites in Africa with an attractive source of rent, something that became a central mechanism in the post-colony's political machinery (Bayart, 1989; Mbembe, 1992). Indeed, Raila Odinga, Kenya's former Prime Minister, described Kenyan gambling in 2016 as "a hustler philosophy" that governing elites manipulated for their own purposes (Louw, 2017, p. 111).⁶ Perhaps the most blatant example of this occurred in 2000 when then-president [Robert Mugabe won the top prize](#) in a Zimbabwean lottery.⁷ Other political elites have been less conspicuous in their extractive practices, but across the continent,

³ Sumptuary laws were common between 1200 and 1800 in Medieval and early modern Europe, in China, Japan and precolonial Benin and Dahomey (Riello & Rublack, 2019).

⁴ See also <http://www.rhodesianstudycircle.org.uk/southern-rhodesia-state-lotteries/>

⁵ With the support of a number of parliamentarians, the Department suggested that social welfare grants be paid out in vouchers rather than cash to stop poor people from wasting their money on the lottery.

⁶ See <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/nairobi/article/2000210992/gambling-is-kenya-s-next-big-scandal-raila-now-cautions>

⁷ While he did not win the jackpot in the Zimbabwe official state lottery, Mugabe's win was in a lottery organised by a partly state-owned bank. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/621895.stm>



lotteries are often tied to corruption.⁸ In some cases, this has led to a loss of public trust in the institution of lotteries. For instance, in the 1970s, Cameroonian punters stopped playing the lottery when it did not pay out prizes and when the lottery lowered the odds of winning (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet, 1996, p. 154).⁹ In other places, lotteries were central barometers of economic and political discontent. Thus, during the 1980s and 1990s, Ghanaian (Goodman, 2019, p. 39) and Senegalese citizens (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet, 1996, pp.157-158) feverishly participated in national lotteries to change their personal fortunes in the wake of the World Bank's structural adjustment programs. When the American green card lottery, or the [Diversity Visa \(DV\) lottery program](#), was launched in the mid-1990s, large numbers of Ghanaians (Goodman, 2019, pp. 27-52), Togolese (Piot, 2010), Nigerians and people from other African countries applied.¹⁰ The popularity of this program has seen large home-grown DV application industries come into being in Ghana, Togo, Algeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, Morocco and Congo-Kinshasa.¹¹

And while these lottery fevers illustrate the ways in which lotteries have come to occupy an important imaginative alternative to postcolonial nightmares, they do not exhaust the ways in which people engage and imagine the 'work' of lotteries on the continent. For instance, in South Africa, where [lottery officials are frequently exposed as corrupt](#), and where punters circulate countless stories about the ways in which [powerful politicians supposedly manipulate lottery](#) wins, enthusiasm for the lottery continues unabated. As I've argued elsewhere, South African punters often view the lottery as an important gauge of their individual ontological 'health' and a key way in which to scrutinize the working of power (van Wyk, 2012; van Wyk, 2013).

Just as postcolonial Africa is not one country, its lotteries do not tell a singular tale or signify one thing. However, they do allow us a new lens on the intimate ways that regular people on the continent relate to the state as an intimate familiar, a vendor of dreams and an alternative to itself.

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⁸ Which was of course not specific to Africa. For instance, in the USA the opposition to lotteries in the early 1800s were centrally informed by their long-standing poor reputation for fraud and corruption (Bobbitt, 2007, p. 2; Sweeney, 2009, pp. 15-30).

⁹ The Cameroonian lottery was relaunched in April 1988 with an instant lottery prize of 1 million francs CFA (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet 1996, p. 154).

¹⁰ See <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Diversity-Visa/DVStatistics/DV-applicant-entrants-by-country-2019-2021.pdf>.

¹¹ See Piot's (2010) wonderful ethnography of this industry in Togo.



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