

Continuities, Dislocations and Transformations: Reflections on 50 Years of African Independence

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(Vereinigung von Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland/VAD)**

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The year 2010 represents a significant milestone for many countries and a majority of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, as it marks half a century of political independence. Since 1960 the continent has undergone profound changes, not only politically but also in economic, social and cultural terms, and manifold processes of consolidation, differentiation and transformation have radically increased the complexity of the African social terrain. The conference will focus on and assess these processes and the conflicts arising from them. Of particular interest are the historical continuities, dislocations and transformations that have marked the past 50 years, as well as how this historical legacy impacts the present situation on the African continent and what this portends for future developments.

To reflect on these issues we invite scholars to propose forums and panels that address the numerous interrelated transformations that have shaped Africa over the last fifty years. The following list of suggested themes is not intended to be an exhaustive catalogue, but to present some focal points of discussion along which the conference theme could be explored:

- Whereas just over ten percent of all Africans lived in cities in 1960, today over half of them are urban dwellers. Urbanisation and population growth, which have given rise to particularly young and dynamic societies, are accompanied by various forms of flows, both in terms of population as well as remittances, within and outside the continent. As a result, Africans now show an unprecedentedly strong, if perhaps rather selective, global presence.
- African agriculture has undergone significant shifts. While in some areas it has been intensified and commercialised to varying degrees so that African produce helps supply a growing urban and a global market, much as was the case in the colonial era, in other areas agriculture has stagnated, with rural areas undergoing processes of de-agrarisation and becoming increasingly dependent on financial flows from the cities or from the diaspora.
- Although in the 1960s many countries began to undergo industrialisation, the economic crises of the 1970s interrupted this development and ultimately resulted in the increasing marginalisation of many African countries vis-à-vis the global economy. Since 1990, however, international development agencies have in response to these economic crises reintensified their engagement with Africa and attempted to implement structural policies that aim not merely to foster economic development, but to achieve a fundamental remodelling of African societies along the lines of neo-liberal principles.
- Africa is currently experiencing a second economic resurgence as the prices of primary resources have skyrocketed, attracting new international actors, most notably China, India and Japan. While this intensifies existing internal conflicts as well as

sparkling new ones within the continent's rentier societies, it also presents new opportunities for the development of post-service economies.

- Today the state is far more present in society than it was 50 years ago, although this presence remains highly fragile and conflict ridden. One major instrument of this intensified reach of the state has been schooling, with school attendance ratios having spread rapidly from extremely low levels inherited as part of the colonial legacy. This trend of a stronger state presence in society has been compounded by the effects of political decentralisation that became national policy in many African nations in the 1990s. At the same time, the end of the Cold War did much to undermine and destabilise state structures in a number of countries.
- Many African states have in the last twenty years undergone a second wave of democratisation (albeit a very precarious one). Today, the political circumstances on the continent are highly variegated, ranging from those of "model democratic countries" like Benin and Ghana, to those of "failed" states like Somalia.
- Various forms of regional conflict and cooperation have developed between African states, such as border conflicts and new forms of economic cooperation. South Africa, once the pariah of the international system, has become an important actor in African regional policy.
- The process of globalisation notwithstanding, the nation-state continues to delineate an important moral community to which African political elites and societal groups in general address their demands and feel accountable. Furthermore, despite the undeniable strength of regional loyalties and ethnic ties, we can indeed observe thriving projects of nationbuilding, both from above and below, in many African countries. Nation-building and state-making depend on the creation of a physical national infrastructure of bureaucrats and bureaucratic institutions, communication networks, schools and other state institutions. At the same time, the process involves a symbolic dimension, including the contested (re)writing of 'national' history which reveals the fault lines of the nation under construction.
- Societal relations have become far more differentiated. Family models have diversified so that today we not only continue to find families based on traditional forms of polygynous marriage, in both rural and urban areas, but also encounter "modern" monogamous families with few children, as well as a range of variations that fall somewhere between the two. Similar processes of differentiation are also evident in the area of elite formation.
- Following independence, many states relegated religion to the private sphere. But for quite some time now, the African continent has been experiencing a boom in religiosity that is manifest not only in the major religions Christianity and Islam in their increasingly diverse forms, but also in indigenous forms of religious practice. New types of religious groups, beliefs and practices are developing, and an unprecedented internationalisation of religious practice is taking place, while religion is also increasingly present in the public sphere as well as in popular and political cultures.
- With the development of modern media, new publics have emerged and multiplied. The mass-media, once controlled by the state, have more recently been faced with increasing competition from newly established private radio and television stations, a flourishing popular press and small-scale cassette or disc-based media which often disseminate unofficial perspectives on everyday African life. The mobile telephone has also become immensely important, not only for everyday communication, but also for political mobilisation and economic activity.

- In the area of cultural production Africa has achieved international prominence in the last 50 years, bringing forth a number of Nobel-laureates in literature and internationally renowned artists. Yet elite artistic activity has been able to exert only limited influence on societal processes in the countries in which it originates. In contrast, the broad field of popular and, for the most part, urban cultural production (music, theatre, video, comics, etc.) has time and again proved to be an important indicator of social developments and provided insightful commentary on societal relations as well as political trends of the past 50 years.
- With the emergence of youth and urban idioms, new forms of linguistic diversity have emerged. National languages, which previously only existed “on paper”, have developed into nationally used and accepted *linguae francae*. Almost all African states have established the research and study of “their” languages at university level and regard the exploration of this legacy as an important and sensitive matter without, however, wishing to compromise themselves by making overt decisions for or against certain languages.
- The academic capacity of African societies for self-reflection has increased significantly through the development of the African university and research systems. This has had notable effects on the nature of scientific and scholarly engagement with the continent, with African voices gaining greater weight in this process. Changes in the nature of African scientific research and scholarship over the past half century, and in research and intellectual reflection on Africa outside the continent, will also be an important topic of discussion at the conference. The fact that in 2010 the VAD will be approaching the 40th anniversary of its establishment presents an opportunity to reflect on these important changes.

The conference of the VAD and the 19th Afrikanistentag are held conjointly in Mainz in April 2010