Africa

Spectrum

Introduction:
Continuities, Dislocations and Transformations: 50 Years of Independence in Africa

Thomas Bierschenk, Eva Spies

Many sub-Saharan African countries celebrated 50 years of political independence in 2010. This presented an opportunity for scholars, politicians and journalists, both within and outside of Africa, to take stock.

The situation on the African continent has changed fundamentally since 1960. Brief general analyses and reviews can scarcely do justice to the complexity of this development process. The processes of consolidation, differentiation and transformation that have caused African societies today to become significantly more complex than they were at the time of independence are simply too multifaceted. Most of the journalistic attempts to take stock of these developments in recent years were limited to the two topics in terms of which we have learned to "view" Africa: democracy and development, or the lack thereof, i.e. dictatorship, state decline, civil war, poverty and hunger. These negative assessments lose sight of just how comprehensively the continent has changed in the past 50 years – not only politically and economically but also, perhaps primarily, in societal and cultural terms. Furthermore, 1960 does not necessarily mark the most significant turning point in recent African history. Indeed, 1960 competes in its significance with other epochal events such as the happenings of the late 1940s, the oil price crisis of 1973, and the democratic upsurge and end of Apartheid in the early 1990s (Cooper 2002; Nugent 2004). Moreover, a few African countries gained independence before 1960, and still others had to wait until the 1970s to attain it.

The contributions presented in this special issue cannot, therefore, claim to present the entire history of the continent over the past half-century from a uniform perspective. They deal with some selected developments and, in this way, aim to contribute to the presentation of a more multifaceted view. Each author deals implicitly or explicitly with concepts like "continuity", "dislocation" and "transformation", and/or with the turning point of 1960. We suggested to the authors that they provide either contributions of a paradigmatic nature and demonstrate processes of change with the help of empirical examples, or contributions that attempt to present a brief over-

view of a topic, summarising the general development trends of recent dec-
ades and formulating prospects where appropriate.[1]

In order to do justice to these wide-ranging changes, it is necessary to
reconsider not only the answers but also the questions. Providing answers to
even seemingly simple questions, such as *Has Africa become more democratic
since 1960?* and *Has it "developed" (economically)?*, is more difficult than may
appear at first glance: The difficulty stems from the fact that the questions
usually relate to the continent as a whole and do not differentiate between
the different states and regions. The development of political conditions in
Africa has branched off in many different directions since the surge in de-
mocratisation of the 1990s, in particular. At one end of the spectrum, we
find the "model states" like Ghana, Benin and Botswana, whose democratic
credentials can be taken far more seriously than, for example, those of most
Arab states prior to the recent revolutions in North Africa – even if their
democratisation processes remain, nonetheless, precarious and reversible. In
other countries like the Central African Republic or parts of the two Con-
gos, the state is merely a kind of external shell. And then we have the "col-
lapsed" states – like Somalia, which functions extremely well in parts (Soma-
liland), but lacks international recognition. In other countries – for example,
Togo, Cameroon, Gabon and Zimbabwe – authoritarian tendencies hardened
after 1990. One should guard against seeing these categorisations as set in
stone, however; as demonstrated by the experience of Uganda, and perhaps
also those of Sierra Leone and Liberia, "collapsed" states can consolidate,
and, as the former model state of Côte d'Ivoire is currently demonstrating,
economic success can be fleeting. The example of South Africa again shows
that political transformation in individual countries should not be consid-
ered only in a national context, as the end of Apartheid has had an impact
on the entire continent, the full extent of which cannot yet be identified.

Even if its presence is usually inconsistent, fragile and conflictive, the
state is overall far more present in African societies today than it was at the
end of the colonial period. The post-1960 era saw the rapid development of

---

1   The articles to follow are revised papers that were originally presented at the
     conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (Vereinigung für Afri-
     kawissenschaften in Deutschland; VAD) entitled "Continuities, Dislocations and
     Transformations: 50 Years of Independence in Africa", which was held at Johannes
     Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany) in April 2010. Two contributions (one by
     Hauke Dorsch and the other by Erdmute Alber, Tabea Häberlein and Jeannett
     Martin) were written especially for this issue. In selecting contributions, we placed
     particular emphasis on thematic and disciplinary diversity, on the one hand, and on
     meeting the specific requirements of the journal, on the other. A broader selection
     of texts will shortly be published in German (Bierschenk and Spies 2011).

public administrations with a particular focus on the health and education systems, which had previously been very rudimentary. The trend toward political decentralisation that has emerged since the 1990s has resulted in the further consolidation of statehood. The state has been trying – not necessarily successfully – to intervene in an unprecedented way in societal matters through the reform of land law and family law, for example. Nowadays, these consolidating structures of statehood are confronted with a vital civil society, which was only in its earliest stages around 1960. The developments that can be observed in this context are also contradictory, however: The end of the Cold War destabilised state structures in many countries on the African continent, and the vitality of civil society can also assume destructive forms.

Many African countries experienced the early stages of industrialisation after 1960; however, the process declined again, at the latest in the aftermath of economic crisis triggered by the oil crisis of 1973. This resulted in the increasing economic marginalisation of African economies at the global level. The fact that these failed development programmes were often devised by external consultants in the context of so-called "development aid" is something that people outside Africa like to forget today. Since the end of the Second World War, no other continent has been the target of so much well-meaning external advice and the scene of such varied development policy intervention and political experiments as has Africa. During the first two decades, these interventions mainly took the form of large-scale infrastructure programmes. The nature of the involvement of the international development agencies then changed in response to the crisis of the 1970s. When the structural adaptations, which were limited to purely macroeconomic indicators, also failed, they were replaced in the 1990s by attempts to implement general structural policy. Their objective is no longer to foster economic development in the narrow sense, but to restructure African societies fundamentally from the outside. Beyond the difficult economic conditions faced by the continent, the greatest obstacle to Africa's development may, perhaps, be said to lie here: The concepts and approaches, on the basis of which realistic development options are negotiated for Africa to the present day, are not usually developed by African actors themselves and are prescribed for the most part from outside the continent. As the Cameroonian writer Patrice Nganang (2010) puts it, what contemporary Africa needs today in the aftermath of independence is a paradigm of independence that could be described as "discursive sovereignty".

However, Africa is currently experiencing a second resource boom and is interacting with new global actors such as China, India and Brazil, which is also influencing its development paths (although it is sometimes forgotten

that these actors are not so new in Africa). This exacerbates the internal conflicts in African rentier economies, while at the same time creating new options for development in relation to infrastructure, industrialisation and the development of a post-service industry. African farms have become far more intensive and commercialised in recent decades, albeit not uniformly – a development that has been fostered not least by rapid urbanisation. As was the case in the colonial period, they are again supplying the global market. Whether African countries succeed in liberating themselves from the economic straitjacket, which originated in the colonial era and still dictates the economic structures in most African countries, is set to become the crucial economic policy issue in the decades to come. In this sense, the end of Apartheid in South Africa was not only a monumental political event, it was also of crucial significance for the resolution of the continent's economic development problems. For, if we look to the future – as Carlos Lopes does in this volume – it is clear that the economic future of the African continent will probably be decided in South Africa (and in Nigeria). Lopes sees Africa, and above all South Africa, as part of an emerging "global South" which can become a new force ("South agency") in the context of the reorganisation of global economic and political power structures.

The postcolonial societal changes of the past 50 years are at least as profound as the political and economic developments. The continent's population increase from 300 million to 1 billion is unprecedented. This development has been accompanied by massive shifts in population and rapid catch-up urbanisation. In 1960 just over 10 per cent of all Africans lived in cities. The corresponding figure today is over 40 per cent and exceeds 50 per cent in Southern and West Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa, whose biggest cities, Johannesburg and Lagos, had populations of approximately 600,000 at the end of the colonial era, is now becoming a region full of cities with over 1 million inhabitants. The continent currently has at least 41 mega-cities, Lagos being the largest of these with over 10 million inhabitants, closely followed by Kinshasa. The urban lifestyles emerging here are characterised equally by processes of consolidation and differentiation and are evidenced, for example, by new forms of communication and communal living. Moreover, Africa's rural areas are no longer cradles of tradition (if they ever were) and have wide-ranging economic, political and cultural links with the urban centres.

Along with population growth and urbanisation, school attendance rates in Africa have also experienced rapid growth. No other continent had such a disastrous colonial legacy to overcome in this sector: Education became a priority only when Africans themselves attained greater political influence toward the end of the colonial era. The belief in progress through

school education became one of the great mobilising convictions of that period. However, it was only toward the end of the twentieth century, when it had undergone an unprecedented process of catch-up development in other sectors, that Africa achieved the school enrolment rates that had already been attained by developing countries in Asia as far back as the mid-1950s.

In terms of the formation of elites, despite increasing participation in education, class boundaries appear to be taking more hold. The end of colonial rule and the early years of independence marked a period of unparalleled social mobility: Relatively well-educated Africans enjoyed a wide variety of opportunities that gave them rapid access to influential and lucrative positions in the state administrations and, in many cases, state-based trade and commerce. In contrast, the increasingly better-educated subsequent generations faced far stronger competition and also had economic crises, corruption and other access restrictions to contend with.

Thanks to demographic growth, African societies are very young: Two out of three Africans are under 25 years of age, twice as many as in ageing Europe. The cities, which are the destinations of most young migrants, are particularly "young". This youthfulness of the African continent is generally perceived as an exclusively problematic phenomenon, and it must be acknowledged that many of the conflicts that exist in Africa, particularly the violent ones, are inter-generational. Therefore, the recognition of the dynamism and creativity associated with this youthfulness and the identification of ways of channelling it into positive developments are perhaps the greatest challenges facing African elites.

Africa's population growth, urbanisation and educational expansion are accompanied by varied forms of migration. As Hans Peter Hahn stresses in his contribution, this is not in any way limited to traditional country–city migration. Today, it is also transnational and (inter)continental in nature and has a decisive influence on the new urban life-worlds. In Hahn's view, the future of African societies, as well as research on urban areas and mobility, lies in this transnational networking. At the same time, transcontinental migration has given rise to a remarkable, if also selective, global presence of Africans – from the football world, in which Africans have now become "global players" in the truest sense, to the music sector, in particular the field of "world music" (cf. Dorsch in this volume).

Societal forms in Africa have also become considerably more differentiated in the process of the "rejuvenation" of society, urbanisation, economic change and migration. This concerns, for example, the family model: Polygynous forms of marriage continue to exist in Africa, and not only in rural areas; however, a growing number of monogamous families with small

numbers of children can also be found, for example, among young urban dwellers, along with all other possible forms of coexistence between these two extremes. Alber, Häberlein and Martin demonstrate this transformation in family relations in the twentieth century on the basis of case studies in Benin and Togo and identify the influence of economic, political, social and religious change on the norms and organisation of these relationships. Despite all the upheaval, however, extended family relationships remain a significant factor for other types of societal dynamics.

A modern media landscape has developed in African cities, which also extends to rural areas. In recent times, the originally state-controlled mass media have been confronted with competition from independent radio and TV stations, a flourishing tabloid press, and small cassette- or disk-based media which also help disseminate unofficial perspectives on everyday African life and positions that are critical of the governing regimes. Mobile telephones have also assumed enormous significance in terms of everyday communication and in the areas of political mobilisation and economic trade. Thanks not least to new technologies and media legislation, new publics have also been able to form and proliferate in many places. Postcolonial national communities have emerged as a result of this and other developments, such as school attendance and the greater penetration of everyday life by the state. Those who consider Africa only from the perspective of ethnic conflicts and local identities tend to overlook this consolidation of nations. In his contribution, Paul Nugent chooses the everyday consumption of music, clothing and, above all, food to show that patterns of consumption also trace and demonstrate the contours of national affiliation in Africa. "Relations of national commensality" should not be equated here with national consciousness; however, they too are indicative of the cultural consolidation of national identity.

The multilingual cities with their media diversity and young populations also constitute social spaces in which youth and urban languages have emerged. In her paper, Rose Marie Beck investigates the question of how urbanisation processes affect linguistic structures and lead, among other things, to the emergence of specific urban youth languages. She views the linguistic practices of urban youths as part of the urbanisation process that simultaneously creates the "city" as a sensory unit and realm of possibility. Thanks to their creative use by young urban dwellers, the national languages, which were previously viewed as purely "paper-based", are now spoken and accepted nationally.

The powerful boom in religiosity that has been under way on the continent for a considerable length of time – and of which there is little awareness in Europe, whose relative "a-religiosity" constitutes a pronounced ex-

ception in the global context – is also particularly prominent in the urban media space. The two major global religions of Islam and Christianity have benefited from this boom and arise in increasingly varying forms. Moreover, the relations between them are usually more peaceful in Africa than elsewhere. However, forms of religiosity that were previously limited to the local level are now also thriving and becoming established at regional and even global levels. Not only are different forms of religious hybrids and new forms of the internationalisation of religion developing, but religious actors are also becoming increasingly prominent in the public sphere and are questioning the hitherto dominant models for the role of religion in modern societies and states.

In terms of cultural production, over the past 50 years Africa has produced Nobel literature laureates and internationally renowned artists. Even if, as Cassis Kilian highlights in her contribution, African auteur cinema was always closely associated with these processes and used film as an imaginative space for the presentation and exploration of alternative postcolonial societal models, elite cultural activity has a very limited influence on societal processes in the artists' own countries. On the contrary, the voices of wideranging – usually urban – forms of popular cultural production (music, theatre, video, comics, etc.) have repeatedly been taken as the indicators of and commentators on societal conditions. All of the political trends of the past 50 years can be observed here – ranging from the nationalism of postindependence and the subsequent ambivalence vis-à-vis power-obsessed dictators to the current trends toward both opening up and isolationism in the age of globalisation. Hauke Dorsch clearly identifies these dynamics in his overview of the pop music styles of the independence era and the following decades and also shows that, although musical preferences often present a link to an individual's own nation, national borders can always be easily crossed through music. For example, the sound of the early 1960s was dominated by Cuban music.

In the context of this introduction, and in the contributions to this thematic issue, it was only possible to touch on a few of these transformation processes. Many more are worthy of mention, not least the changes experienced by the universities, which, with the exception of South Africa, were practically non-existent in sub-Saharan Africa in 1960. Their number has grown steadily since then, and they now produce researchers who focus intensively on the situation in their own countries and the possibilities they offer. Some continuities or upheavals referred to in this publication would perhaps be viewed differently from their perspectives. Hence, we make no claim to providing a comprehensive account or definitive judgement. Nonetheless, we hope that the individual essays clearly show that the dy-

namics at work in each individual field are not only multifaceted but also far from always being clear, therefore they do not ultimately lead to a single and polished reading.

References

Bierschenk, Thomas and Eva Spies (eds.) (2011, forthcoming), *Kontinuitäten und Brüche: 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika*, Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

Cooper, Frederick (2002), *Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present,* Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press.

Nganang, Patrice (2010), *Was heißt (schon) Unabhängigkeit? Autobiographie eines Konzeptes*, Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 116, online: <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/workingpapers/AP116.pdf> (21 March 2011).

Nugent, Paul (2004), *Africa Since Independence. A Comparative History*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas Bierschenk is a professor in the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz.

Eva Spies is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz.