

History of the research group

The new research programme of the Social Movements and Political Culture in Africa (SMPC) theme group is primarily based on work undertaken by the Culture, Politics and Inequality in Africa (CPI) theme group, which will round off its research in 2007. Since 2002, this theme group – with six core members and five associate members – has been concentrating on the dynamics of formations of power and cultural repertoires in Africa and their relationship with politics, political culture, collective identities, social inequality and conflict in African societies. Members have paid specific attention to the role that cultural resources, as repertoires and as patterns of behaviour invested with meanings widely shared and recognized in a given region or population, have played in the formation of new power relations and conflicts. Africa in the past four years has experienced continuing problems in political stability, the public sphere, economic life and social organizational structures. CPI members have tried to understand the historical and socio-cultural background for this and have contributed to major studies of religion and power, the problems of state survival, ethnicity and its political role, the changing role of youth, historical patterns of revolt and resistance, current conflicts, and the importance of religious movements and actors in the public and ideological sphere in various African countries. The theoretical location of most CPI research was thus in the study of the interplay between history, structure and agency.

Over past few years, the CPI group has operationalized key aspects of its research programme by addressing in more detail some of the historical, cultural and religious arenas and actors in the changing power and identity formations in African societies. One key assumption was that specific historical and cultural factors decisively contribute to the (re)shaping of contemporary social structure and power formations. They also define and constrain the scope of individual agency. In addition, the contested nature of the cultural, especially in relation to ethnic identity as applied to politics, was increasingly recognized. It became clearer that analysis of the manifest spheres of politics, international relations and development, in contrast to that of the informal and ideational spheres, does not usually suffice to explain the facts on the ground.

Set within the theoretical orientation of the theme group's programme, empirical research was carried out in archives and through fieldwork, interviews and direct observation. Based on the realization that long-term structural processes affect many current developments and aspects of African societies, considerable attention was devoted to the historical dimension, sometimes extending into the pre-colonial period in Africa.¹

This emphasis on the importance of historical research was also concretized with regard to a continuing central concern of the theme group: the study of violent conflict. While 'conflict studies' have become an extremely important part of the social sciences in general, as well as of policy-makers' agendas, CPI has been calling urgent attention to the understudied dimension of long-term causative factors shaping the manifestations and traits of current violent political formations – the *longue durée* – of violence in contemporary African societies.

Additional points of interest were the following: processes of political transition and reform (South Africa's democratization process, Ethiopia); conflict in Africa (West Africa, the Horn of Africa); civil society and politics (Cameroon); and religion and society (Mali). The international dimension of Africa's problems – the nature of its relations to the rest of the world – was recognized as crucial, as evident in donor-country pressure, global regimes of development and the human rights discourse (e.g. via the UN), and religious expansionism.

Studies of the African present are increasingly drawing attention to the importance of the religious and, more generally, the ideological sphere in the construction of power and identity in contemporary African societies. CPI members contributed significantly to this field of study.

Finally, the study of conflict and contentious political and cultural formations in contemporary Africa cannot be seen in isolation from the usually problematic role of youth. They

¹ The domain of social and economic inequalities was not a major thrust in our research although it had been expected to be so when the programme was initially drawn up in 2002. This was due to one of the CPI members (human geographer Dr D.F. Bryceson) taking up a position in the UK in 2004.

often play a key role in the mobilization of political support, in the emergence of conflict in some of Africa's most volatile regions and, more specifically, in the formation of ethnic militias, vigilante groups or the youth movement branches of existing political forces. The CPI theme group devoted a conference and a book to this subject in 2003 and 2004 respectively.