Collaboration and Contestation in Words: Dialogues and Disputes in African Social Realities

Background

In African societies today, growing inequality and continued exclusion due to ethnicity, gender, religion, disability or sexual orientation give rise to both contestation and cooperation for social change. On the one hand, the public is being addressed by social movements that campaign for an improvement of social justice, equality, rights and inclusiveness; on the other hand, the same public is drawn into a fierce debate about reordering identities, belonging, and/or exclusiveness. This CRG aims to investigate the manner in which written and spoken words are turned into an instrument that move social groups and organizations to act in order to attain certain desired goals or, conversely, to impede others from attaining their goals and objectives. From different disciplinary backgrounds, the CRG aims to draw attention specifically to forms of discourse (written or spoken) that lead to collective action in areas of social life that are marked by strife.

The spoken and written words can, therefore, be seen as both creating *collaboration* and forging *contestation*. That is to say, movements that engage common people and powerholders to achieve particular aims and targets in the reordering of the public domains and policies, as well as movements that sharpen distinct identities by laying claims that contest the position of others. Collaboration and contestation can thus be seen as two sides of the same coin; while movements mobilize people to organize themselves to advocate for and strategize achieving specific goals and objectives, it also involves a perspective on collective contestation against structures of power, of inequalities and infringements of (human) rights.

Likewise, movements that exemplify highly charged political or religious notions of antagonisms in the pursuit of particular (fundamentalist, extremist, exclusionary) identities often rely on particular forms of speech that conjure up a collaborative attempt at such things as collective heritage, culture, social positions or access to resources. In other words, the CRG proposes to study the interrelationship and mutual dependencies among specific discourses, polemics, dialogues and disputes through which both collaboration (between some groups) and contestation (between other groups) emerges and produces particular '*worded repertoires*'. These worded repertoires of *both cooperation and dispute* are at the heart of this CRG and will be studied from different disciplinary perspectives

We are interested in exploring:

1. the formats of dialogues and disputes in the service of collaboration and contestation that appear to exist in many public domains of African societies today. Discourse/language/spoken/written word is relevant to study both as means (instrument) and end (product/outcome).

2. what these formats aim to address, how they are socially, culturally, historically and politically shaped and what their transnational connections of contestation are in terms of language, resources and alliances.

3. the way in which these dialogues and disputes need the media, and resonate with communicative forms that have the capacity to address the hearts and minds of multitudes.

I. Communicative formats

We are interested in exploring the features of communicative formats that social movements of various sorts use when addressing their concerns in public domains. The first is that of 'advocacy', the second that of 'polemics'.

- Advocacy: a communicative format in and of activism and mobilization.

In many African countries, public institutions are not structures of voluntary cooperation, often do not solve redistributive conflicts and do not work towards the benefit of all. Typically, alternative power dynamics take place outside legal structures through informal institutions or networks, which may contradict, complement or enhance the workings of formal institutions (Hagmann & Péclard 2010).

A wide range of civil society groups on the African continent, ranging from social movements and community groups to trade unions and professional foreign funded NGOs, are addressing issues such as discriminatory legislation, unequal access to basic goods and services, and prejudices that lead to discrimination. Here, the international human-rights discourse has often provided inspiration and moral legitimation for a range of causes in Africa (Ellis & Van Kessel, 2009), from the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by most African states, to campaigns against blood diamonds in Sierra Leone.

The spoken and written word found in the campaigning for such issues is often typically part of communicative strategies seeking to incite resonance with the emotions, values and beliefs of target audiences. Well chosen 'frames' that define problems, assign blame and identity solutions are key to mobilizing supporters and convincing target audiences (Benford & Snow, 2000). How such communicative formats relate to and inspire collective action for social change by civil society in African contexts, however, remains a topic that is not yet fully understood. Some pending questions include:

- What are the historical origins of advocacy and activism towards the inclusion of marginalized groups?
- How do different types of African civil society groups advocate towards inclusion in their context, and what enables them to do so?
- How do African advocates and activists mobilize supporters for their cause?

These questions require consideration of the dynamics of power and the interactions between influential stakeholders (e.g. state agencies, companies, political elites, churches, traditional leaders, the military, the media and the international aid system), activists and advocates. Moreover, the above questions are to be critically examined within the context of on-going (theoretical) debates on, for example, inclusive development, the relevance of Western theories and definitions for understanding African activism and advocacy, and the tendency in the literature to ignore the 'dark side' of African civil society (e.g. promoting intolerance, discrimination, exploitation) to which the second aspect of the study of communicative formats relates:

- Polemics; a communicative format in and of identity-marking & mapping.

While rigid identities are per definition polemical, this CRG also aims to draw attention to the specific role that the spoken and written word has - and increasingly is acquiring - in the carving out of religious, political and ethnic

identities that are being hardened. Inflammatory speech that incites stiff polemics and public debates is increasingly being recorded in various places in Africa and among African diaspora. It is being produced in and by specific religious and political circles or in ethnic-based conflict and contestation. Often, the polemics that are instigated by such discourses draw great attention as they are cast in public media, circulate in social networks and reproduced as pamphlets, graffiti and lyrics.

An in-depth, comparative understanding is required of how such polemics precisely relate to contestations and hardenings of identity;

- Which communicative means and forms are chosen to incite and inflame contestations by religious, political and ethnic spokespersons and opinion leaders?

- Why are specific terms and discourse styles chosen, and what gives them their polemical capacity? What are the local and public checks and balances on polemical forms such as 'hate-speech', defilement, insult and ridicule?

- What kind of polemical repertoires exist and how are these mediated across the generations, gender and class in the various religious, political and ethnic circles?

II. The making of dialogues and disputes; producers, politics and constraints

In addition to questions of format, effect and social & ideological trajectories of these dialogues and disputes, a second question the CRG aims to address is the politics of the production of the ways that language is used in advocacy and polemics. One level at which this question will be explored is that of actors; both individual actors, i.e. spokespersons, opinion leaders, religious & community leaders, can all be seen as playing a part in using, tapping into and reworking local, cultural and historical registers of speech and the written word. Actors can also be institutional actors, i.e. organizations and social groups, which tap into and utilize the same resources in producing these articulated expressions. Yet, beyond the local, this CRG is also interested in the manner in which there are wider, transnational, transcultural and global exchanges that operate on the same level as sources for the production of these dialogues and disputes. One question is: How do foreign ties and foreign aid enable and constrain African advocates and activists in reaching their goals? While this may highlight the role of foreign aid in African activism and advocacy (Edwards, 2009; Hearn, 2007), when it comes to polemics and identity-based 'fighting with words', similar processes of foreign involvement in the production of things such as 'hate speech' can also be noted. There are particular strings attached to the manner in which, through their work, external agencies, such as internationally operating faith-based NGOs (FBOs), seem to impact local public discourses where this addresses particular identities (e.g. homosexuality).

In other words, the making of dialogues and disputes appears to be located at the meeting point between the local and the global, leading to the reworking of existing registers of public expression and discourses, while also producing new ones.

III. Media is the message; language-use, mediatization, and materials

We are fascinated by the way in which these dialogues and disputes need the media, are increasingly mediatized, and resonate with communicative forms that have the capacity to address the hearts and minds of multitudes. Advocacy and polemics, and the manner in which these can be seen to produce collaboration or contestation,

increasingly require the mastery of modern means of communication. Communication technologies engineer the manner in which multitudes can be reached with specific messages. In many parts of Africa, a virtual hype characterizes the way in which radio, television and, in particular, social media produce domains of advocacy as well as polemical debate. The rise of journalism – in all its forms – is surely contributing to this process, much as opinion leaders, activists, spokespersons and others need the specific skills and capacities of mass-oriented journalism to reach out to a larger public.

This means, by implication, that 'media-skills', 'media-training', and expertise in the operation of the social media networks have become an intrinsic requirement in making the spoken and written word reach various audiences. Choosing the right communication channel (e.g. national press, online media, radio, TV 'talk shows', theatre, pamphlets, music, videos and songs) is key to ensuring the intended audience is reached. Moreover, using the media implies a specific 'packaging' ongoing in producing efficacy of social-issue-related messages. Narratives seem to be the most compelling when they are tailored to a specific audience in terms of content, channel of communication and timing. Some groups specialize in this; many new Pentecostal churches, for example, have become experts in using such mediatized forms as automated Whatsapp messaging in order to get their views to an ever-growing audience. Activist groups are doing the same in the way they build and operate websites, make use of Twitter, Facebook pages and manage to media-package their concerns effectively.

This mediatization creates an interesting departure from localized forms of orality, of oral traditions and cultures, and the way in which these become refracted in the modern forms of communication. New processes of creative adaptation of the written and the spoken word are emerging, allowing the CRG to understand and explore the way in which mediatization is a localizing process; this is in contradistinction from the manner in which these media can be studied as a 'global gloss-over'. The embeddedness of the dialogues and disputes in local contexts remains important for a proper understanding of the mediatized packaging.

Research themes

We think that we can better understand the power of language in social mobilization by examining concepts/ themes including: expression of identities; ideologies; polemics; advocacy; activism; campaigning; strategy/tactics; means (audio, visual, analogue or digital); forms (content, way of expression/forms of communication/language use); gestures, body language and symbolic artefacts (flags, outfits); media; civic space, public space, public sphere, civil society; empowering; speech act (what is said becomes a reality); global-local nexus.

Activities and cooperation

In order to achieve these research objectives, this CRG will, in addition to collaboration with all interested researchers from the staff of the ASCL, also seek to establish links with stakeholders elsewhere in and through seminars and research activities & exchanges. Stakeholders will include NGOs, policymakers and interest groups in relevant domains of the CRG research & exchange activities, in the Netherlands, in Europe and in Africa. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the activities of this CRG, joint research projects and publications will be encouraged.