“Seeking the political kingdom”...: researching governance and politics in Africa in a political culture perspective


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“When you pick up a book about Africa, it is almost inevitably not so much about Africa as about us. Africa is an obsession for a great many people, even some who have never set foot there ….. [It] is sufficiently exotic, and far enough away, that outsiders have always been able to approach it with a kind of untroubled certainty …..” (L. Krotz 2009: 3).

Zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this occasion I would like to present a few reflections under the title “Seeking the political kingdom”...: researching governance and politics in Africa in a political culture perspective.

In 2001 political scientists Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes published a study on political behaviour in Africa, entitled ‘Africans’ surprising universalism’. This was on the crest of the big wave of studies on ‘democratization in Africa’. They demonstrated, on the basis of survey data, that ordinary African populations across the continent appreciated democratic governance and good-working law and justice systems in virtually the same terms as most Westerners or others living in democratic political systems. Africans had high expectations of the newly elected governments and their developmental programs, and would like to be able

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1 Independent Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah spoke the words, “Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else shall be added unto you”, expressing his idea that via state politics all else for the nation’s citizens would easily be realized, like national economic development, social equality, etc. See also Fantu 2012.
to judge them on their performance, and if need be vote them out. Bratton and Mattes noted some cultural and perceptual differences in people’s definitions of democracy, but they suggested the underlying universalist narrative was clear.²

I maintain that the aspirations of especially younger generations of Africans are exactly the same 16 years later. Except that their impatience and their self-confidence have increased notably, based on more social ambition, education, and ICT availability and versatility. This similarity of aspirations across time gives us a basis for studying and understanding African politics and governance in a comparative perspective and not claim ‘special place’ for Africa. But while we may see that there is no basic difference in political ideas and expectations in Africa compared to other parts of the world, we also have to recognize some context factors, such as historical tradition, the concerns with continuity, and the interaction with value systems, connected to for instance cultural or religious traditions, which often influence political practice. Africa in this respect has to be studied in its own terms³ and not on the basis of preconceived models, and not as if the continent is ‘one’. In this quest it’s helpful to begin with charting the ‘political culture’ of a country: a concept used not to ‘explain’ its political system or power structures, but to examine what value positions and cultural assumptions are brought to bear in the political process. The term ‘political culture’ dates from the 1960s,⁴ but its relevance was shown already in A. de Tocqueville’s great study De la Démocratie en Amérique (1835-41).⁵ Remarkably, it is more applied in studies on developed and Western societies than on those in Africa.⁶ Political culture can be defined as a set of widely shared beliefs, values and norms concerning the ways that people think that political life is, or ought to be, pursued.⁷ It relates to collective preference formation within polities or communities, and more specifically, as R. Wilson has phrased it “... how culture constrains preferences and how preferences affect culture” (Wilson 2000: 247).⁸ Political culture is the

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² See also Marcus et al. 2001 and Karlström 1996.
³ See the interesting and perceptive study by P. Chabal 2009.
⁴ I.e., since Almond & Verba 1963.
⁵ And perhaps even before that, in Ibn Khaldun 1377, or in Herodotos’s Histories.
⁶ Perhaps because people are afraid that it might sound too ‘culturalist’. For a good discussion of political culture from an influential political scientist, and made in a more optimistic era, see Diamond 1999: 161-217.
⁷ See also Welzel & Inglehart 2010.
⁸ In order not to beg the question of what ‘culture’ is, I here refer to it simply as a shared way of doing things, a ‘reference repertoire’ of meaning and action, within a collective group, and the
result of a cumulative process of value preferences made relevant in the political domain. The concept, being heuristic, offers a good way to connect politics to people’s historical and cultural repertoires that inform their behavior. Historically, it also reveals the ‘resistance of culture’, to use Marshall Sahlins’s words. Incidentally, a great way to start studying political culture is to collect proverbs and political jokes in a country. They reveal popular ideas, comments and expectations about the political sphere and political actors. Let me, in the interests of time, repress the urge to tell you a few good jokes; I can do that in the break.

Debates on African politics and governance have yielded many insights on state formation and fragility, the lingering burden of the colonial past in present-day states, on democratization, and on electoral systems and processes. But also on shadow states and autocratic state structures, the deeply corrosive effects of corruption, the formative role of insurgent movements, and also on popular struggles for rights and accountability. The fascinating 2015 book *Africa Uprising*, by Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly presents many examples of the latter. This work clearly counters the often cheerleading talk in many circles, esp. those around the World Bank, about ‘Africa Rising’, and calls attention to the entire picture, recognizing differentiation and diversity in developmental paths as well as problems of the political sphere in itself.

Needless to say, the achievements of Africa in economic and developmental perspectives since the beginning of this century are remarkable. Agrarian production has increased and often kept pace with population growth, industrialization has begun, although with a slow start, Africa’s role in world trade and strategic resources is stronger, and more people than ever are educated, reaching higher levels. Infrastructure and energy investments are notable, and may lay down the foundations for sustained growth. New classes are formed, and emerging ‘consumer markets’ produce a new political-economic dynamic.

But as Branch and Mampilly (2015) have noted, not only are many people not yet benefitting from growth and change and are societies being divided and fragmented, also is there resilient

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9 Sahlins 2002: 56.
10 See the major synthesis by Cheeseman 2015.
11 The most persuasive account of this is S. Chayes (2013).
autocracy and fundamental contestation on the ideas of political community. These aspirations for community are not ‘dissolved’ in all those new developmental efforts. The most recent report by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2017) also suggests that contestation and protests in Africa are not dependent on the ups and downs of the continent’s GDP growth figures. And people are not simply going to sit up and say thank you to the regimes that have brought them more roads, bridges and factory jobs if they always have to keep their mouth shut, are dispossessed or experience frequent repression. In many African societies today, social inequality and exclusion are undiminished if not reinforced, and instability is just under the surface. These aspects, accompanied by unprecedented population increase and structural economic growth being fragile, deserve much more research attention. More focus on the African political sphere as such is needed because of its remarkable dynamics and its specific historical roots. As the just-quoted authors said in their recent book: “Yesterday’s ‘Afro-pessimism’ and today’s Afro-optimism equally misrepresent the actual political transformations unfolding across the continent” (2015: 1). They mean that fundamental disputes are in progress on what constitutes this ‘political community’, or on ideals of inclusion, and that alternative orders are claimed by protesters. The protesters are not simply ‘rioters’. Political actors like youngsters, certain unrepresented minorities, or related social groups in Africa attempt to redefine their own political subjectivity, independently of the models of governmentality projected by state regimes onto their subjects. These actors do this by creating alternative spaces or new expressions and vocabularies of political discourse. Such strategies of what might be called ‘cultural politics’ merit close scrutiny. Political-demographic analysis could also be insightful here. For instance, interesting comparative demographic research by Jack Goldstone, Richard Cincotta and Jennifer Sciubba found that where large numbers of youngsters are present in a country (with a median age around or

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13 E.g., both in social practices and in the media.
below 20), political instability is likely to stay, and chances for durable democracy to emerge are limited.\textsuperscript{14}

When looking at overall demographic trends, we should \textit{not} only to pay attention to the \textit{urban} classes and youth groups,\textsuperscript{15} but also to what is happening in the countryside. Because here some decisive political contests will take place, as seen in the realignments of loyalties beyond the state, the horizontal recruitment of youths into radical violent movements,\textsuperscript{16} and the engagement in new predatory economic practices (such as contraband, illegal wildlife trade, human smuggling). This shows that (youth) contestation will certainly not always be nice and peaceful.

In what follows I briefly mention three thematic fields for future research, aware that I leave out many topics, for instance the popular subject of neo-patrimonialism,\textsuperscript{17} the developmental state debate, or violent conflict and civil war, of which Africa still has a major portion.

A first domain of study would of course be that of the recent dynamics within \textbf{political systems and institutions}: that is, elections, parties, parliaments, the justice system, decentralized decision-making structures, presidentialism and constitutional issues, and informal power & business networks behind the scenes. Political systems comprise more than governance of the economy and of the nation’s developmental enterprise. Nic Cheeseman’s recent synthesis \textit{Democracy in Africa} (2015) evaluating the processes of democratization in recent decades is a good illustration, and shows that African politics has \textit{a dynamic of its own}. He also notes that, despite progress, Africa has not made quantum leaps in democracy reforms. Africa may even have given an entirely new meaning to the term ‘democracy’: because even if there is a multiparty system officially in place, with periodic elections, a country can fail to be ‘democratic’.\textsuperscript{18} Some so-called promising new starts, like South Sudan

\textsuperscript{14} See: ‘Demography driving Arab Awakening’s democratic prospects?’ At http://www.demdigest.net/blog (accessed 20-9-2017). In addition, research by M. Farzanegan (see his 2017 blog article), showed that next to youthful demography also the level of \textit{corruption} in a country is a destabilizing factor raising chances of revolt.

\textsuperscript{15} As Branch & Mampilly’s \textit{Africa Uprising} book tends to do.


\textsuperscript{17} See Mkandawire 2015 for a critique.

\textsuperscript{18} In general, elections at some point have to appear to give credence to democratization, but they are in general much over-rated as a criterion and do not measure political communication between people and government. Cf. Abbink 2017.
in 2011, utterly failed. An appreciation of this country’s recent history and political culture might have warned us at the time that it would likely not deliver. And the surrealistic drama of the DR Congo continues as well.

What is clear from African politics is the great variety of local political models, including those of the so-called ‘developmental states’. Democratic systems are still an ideal, although fuzzy as to definition, but they need careful engineering, for instance to meet ethnic quotas, to get a phased expansion of electoral procedures, and to build effective legal support mechanisms. As often suggested, the ‘one-size-fits-all model’ of democracy is not a good idea. Context-sensitive and negotiated political structures, as in Burundi since 2004 until the recent crisis provoked by President P. Nkurunziza in 2016, or the relatively well-working hybrid democracy in Somaliland, or the specific parliamentary form of Ghana with its non-elected House of Chiefs, are examples that homegrown structures rather than imported ones can work, and are desirable. The full variety of such solutions as well as their legal concomitants needs more basic study.

One important sub-set of research questions here relates to what I just noted: urban rebellions and youth action. We saw their importance in 2014, when Burkina Faso’s long-ruling President was ousted by massive street revolts; or recently in large demonstrations in Togo. A second sub-theme is that of formations of citizenship; and a third, the rise of ‘African middle classes’. Let me expand a bit on the latter. It is a theme drawing renewed attention, and assessing the possibly ‘democratizing role’ of new middle classes is popular. In his 2014 study on Kenya, Nic Cheeseman found that the emerging middle class indeed had a stronger commitment to democracy, over and beyond ethnic loyalties. This does, however, not apply to all countries; although the decline of ethnicity as a political identity seems to be a more general feature of economically developing societies. But there is no general political law

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19 As Bratton & Mattes indicated in 2001.
21 See the work by Darbon & Toulabor 2014.
23 See also Biniam 2016 on the trans-ethnic politics of elites in Kenya. In some countries, like Rwanda or Ethiopia, the one party-regime, recognizing this fact, takes strenuous efforts to co-opt this middle class (or ‘middle income’ groups) and to repress its political trajectory by tying it to the party regime and neutralizing its preferences via a variety of measures: intimidation,
saying that African middle classes are ‘agents of democratization’. Often they align themselves, of necessity, to the powers-that-be, or, as my colleague Ton Dietz suggested here a few weeks ago in his valedictory lecture, are busy eating ice cream..

One aspect of the much heralded rise of middle classes is often neglected: that by their growth, class boundaries in general are made more distinct and that other classes/groups are left behind: the lower working classes, the unemployed, minorities, caste groups, and what nowadays is called the ‘precariat’. Also, in some countries, like Angola or Ethiopia, Kenya or Nigeria, fabulously rich and politically well-linked upper-classes have emerged, with a network of vested interests and part of a ‘political-economic-military’ complex. The point here is that current class formation in Africa is indicative of new processes of inequality and of more pronounced social hierarchies. This poses a range of political problems. The study of governance and politics in Africa should continue to address these.

As a second major theme for study, I would emphasize the local politics of resource control and of environmental governance, one of the greatest challenges globally and in Africa in particular. We are not only talking about climate change – about which studies have almost reached a saturation point – but about the way in which environmental constraints and problems that are produced by global and African developmental trajectories combine with rapid population growth and agrarian insecurity. Studies on this have to be locally anchored. While the urban sphere in Africa seems a prime locus of political activity, perhaps the rural areas are as important, because land is still a (or perhaps the) backbone of African economies – both for the externalized extraction of mineral resources and for agrarian (food) production. And as I observed from fieldwork in the Horn of Africa, many small-scale, environmentally adapted and functioning local economies are being threatened or dismantled. Before being properly studied and valued, they are replaced by investment schemes and state enterprises that exclude people, subvert the local agro-ecology, and even carry little guarantee for real prohibition or harassment of opposition parties, job loss threats, unfair business competition. So: often political forces interfere in the economic sphere, showing them to be virtually one domain.

24 See Naomi Klein 2014.
26 And are designed in ignorance of the delicate ecological history of a region; cp. Marchant & Lane 2012.
commercial success. They often undermine livelihood resiliency and disempower people, via processes of new class formation, or via authoritarian governance models: that is to say, on the basis of a specific political model, complete with cultural hegemonism, and often with negligible respect for rule-of-law principles. Of course, governments/regimes may choose such a course, but they then create their own resistance. Today in almost half of the 54 African countries we find resistance movements or periodic revolts, many of them with armed contestation. The stability effects of development aid and top-down large-scale economic ventures, e.g., mono-crop plantations – much advertised by donor countries, foreign investors and global institutions like the World Bank - are elusive. The ongoing support for highly securitized autocracies may also not be advisable in the long run. Accountability of African governments should ultimately not be to external actors and funders but to their citizens, who demand that right.

In short, Africa’s resources and resource use are the issue of enormous contestation, both by foreign and domestic actors, and are generating intense competition and power play. In fact, many analysts expect that if current downward trends are not firmly tackled, a ‘crunch scenario’ might set in, with irreversible decline. The future of the continent depends largely on the equitable governance of resources and environmental conditions, and on room for allowing local initiatives to counter resource decline. As the scramble for ‘resources’ continues, both by outsiders and locally, we have to study how this actually unfolds.

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27 Compare also Sassen 2014.
28 On this, see Weingast 2009.
29 Excluding non-recognized Western Sahara and Somaliland.
30 See also Park 2009 on the meanings of ‘sustainability’.
31 At the same time this donor industry of support will not stop. A consolation is that this again gives us nice material to study under the chair on ‘politics & governance in Africa’.
33 And as we often hear, environmental laws are easily subverted by bribery and corruption. Not all is bleak, however. There is commitment to the SDGs, and we see initiatives like the ‘Green Wall’ project – the construction of an 8000 km.-long belt of trees to halt desert encroachment and to retain moisture so as to expand cultivation sites and employment. In Senegal it is a great success. Other countries may follow suit.
A third domain of politics and governance in Africa requiring renewed study is no doubt religion and politics.\textsuperscript{34} The continent-wide commitment to religious identification has grown strongly, or rather has morphed into new forms, both in terms of what is called ‘empowerment’ of people, and as a body of conservative micro-political practices with strong social conformism effects.\textsuperscript{35} Religion (in Christian, Islamic and neo-traditionalist forms) has thus come to impact strongly on self-fashioning and regimenting personal lives, and on politics. We have seen religious leaders emboldened to contest constitutional reform processes (e.g., those meant to give more rights to women) or to combat the status of the ‘secular’ laws guaranteeing or trying to maintain ‘neutral public space’. As we see in communal strife and polemical exchanges, there are mimetic rivalries going on between faith groups, each constructing their own truths and scapegoating others so as to exclude them, sometimes even from legitimate existence. The importance of this goes beyond mere religious rivalry and deeply affects if not endangers the political sphere.\textsuperscript{36} Also crucial here is studying the emergence of ‘hybrid’ or violent politico-religious movements, as well as security concerns and public sphere issues of ‘managing diversity’. Religious identification often contributes to the values brought to bear in the (African) political arena, and we simply have to recognize this.

Under this chair, we do not aim to study religious life primarily in its expressive, embodied, and cultural aspects – as done in religious studies and anthropology, but more in its pretended political roles; in its ‘instrumentalizations’. This is a current challenge: it should not be forgotten that the overwhelming majority of African political orders are constitutionally defined as ‘secular’ – i.e., separation of state and religion – despite the great pressure that is building up to change this.\textsuperscript{37}

Focusing on these three themes, this chair thus proposes to tackle the study of African politics and governance in the broad sense. We aim to do this via a number of new PhD research

\textsuperscript{34} See also Abbink 2014.
\textsuperscript{35} See already the pioneering work by Fatima Mernissi, e.g., her 1987 (1976\textsuperscript{1}) book.
\textsuperscript{36} The work of R. Girard is relevant here: see his 2007 study. Also W. Palaver 2005. It is a global phenomenon.
\textsuperscript{37} The urgency of this topic is clear, because in development policy circles the idea has come up that working with religious organizations and leaders is positive and should always be stimulated. We cast doubt on this and plead for critical research and evaluation of this.
projects; and cultural-historical analysis, comparison, and also good case studies must figure prominently. We think that politics and governance in Africa are domains to be studied not as a ‘function’ of development processes, but in their own right, because both elites and the common populace have political ideas and ideals which they expect to be addressed and realized. In the African context, citizens have rising expectations and demands to their rulers to perform - in public service delivery, allowing access to free media use and cultural expression, etc. - and show resistance to presidents who stay too long and who unconstitutionally extend term limits. Furthermore, the ubiquitous context of ‘development’ - impressive as it is in 21st century Africa – is not to be seen as economic only. Development is a wider transformative process, a ‘package deal’: also comprising social, intellectual, cultural, and political issues, and inclusion claims. Youth in Africa see it as such.\(^{38}\)

Next to history and anthropology, political science now seems also to have rediscovered Africa, accompanied by a (re-)emphasis on political ethnography.\(^{39}\) Efforts should be supported for combining such ethnography with the more intensive use of statistical-quantitative data and datasets on political values and attitudes, like Afrobarometer, the World Values Survey, Demographic & Health Surveys, the V-Dem project (at Gothenburg University) and the Pew Research Center surveys on Africa. Such survey data – and other ‘big data’-sets,\(^{40}\) more and more of them digital - give the contours of reality, be it not always the inside dimensions, the ‘deep structures’.\(^{41}\) Without profounder in-depth historical, cognitive, and anthropological field research as well as narrative analysis, the big data remain indicative only. These approaches, including political ethnography, allow contextual study of situated actors and activists, elites, state and party cadres, or policy strategies, and also of voters and local traditional decision-making agents. Ethnographic attention may be time-consuming and strenuous; but its ‘immersion’ techniques may produce more reliability and validity of data. These approaches thus could yield more grounded studies of what constitutes ‘the political’, and of how people develop political agency, or political capacity.

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\(^{38}\) Youths are in the vanguard here, demanding more access to education, skills training, jobs, social mobility, health-care (Lancet Commission 2017), and freedom from the control of established and sometimes stifling social frameworks and hierarchies. They do not intend to wait.

\(^{39}\) Cf. Aronoff & Kubik’s major synthesis, 2013.

\(^{40}\) See for instance, Lane 2011, 2016.

\(^{41}\) See for a good illustration of the relevance of such ‘deep structures’, the great ethnography by Mariane Ferme 2001 on Sierra Leone.
The political domain is obviously not only formed or relevant on the level of the state. Speaking from field experience in the Horn of Africa I would say that local decision-making structures, being rooted in ethnic or regional traditions and community-based frames of reference, are still very important and are not all eroded by state cooptation or repression. The recent book by H. Amborn (2016) gives an excellent overview of this and discusses the philosophical premises of political order and law of such local, often polycephalous, societies. Indeed, in the societal spaces where the state has retreated or is fragile – as in many conflict areas – such local arenas of power and authority formation are still very important and can be norm- and rule-generating.

In researching these issues, the continued and active collaboration with African colleagues is vital, in contexts of more equality and collegiality.

I want to end with a quote of the customary words spoken at the opening of a legal or political debate in Konso, a society in southern Ethiopia. These words, spoken by an elder, perfectly encapsulate the norms of local politics and show a contrast with the norms of state discourse: “Everyone who wants to speak can bring any idea he thinks fit if he raises his hand and waits his turn. Speak peacefully and courteously, and even when you bring something that you

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43 Cf. the work by Unruh 2005; Amborn 2016; and also Wiener 2014.

So we must pay attention to ‘levels of governance’: it is on these lower, local levels, in structures of shared identity and economy, where the very ideas of governability are created and practiced (cf. Amborn 2014). People respond to issues close to their actual livelihoods - problems of land alienation, of dispossession, of external intrusions next door, and to local problems of drought and resource loss. They also react to state narratives and concrete practices of cultural or ethnic discrimination, and prefer a functional justice system for which they usually had local mechanisms in place (Amborn, ibid.)

44 Here we must have an eye for the issue of possible specifics of ‘knowledge production’ in Africa (cf. Owoahene 2013) – a nice ‘counter-hegemonic’ epistemological challenge. Although serious differences in funding structures, quality of university education, academic freedom, career advancement and publication possibilities still exist, it is hard to believe - see Kwame Appiah (2005), Jean-Loup Amselle (2010) and others - in a basic difference in principles of knowledge formation and testing in Africa, or by Africans, vs. the rest of the world. We are part of the same discursive spaces, despite that they show disagreements and significant variations in cultural traditions and power hierarchies, i.e., in ‘context’. The critiques of ‘decolonizing knowledge’ are not always convincing and often have a shaky philosophical basis.

45 Cited in Amborn 2016: 144.
condemn or disagree with, do not shout or cry out, but speak with a low voice, quietly, politely, and with patience. And, always speak the truth. This is the way of a good discussion”.

These words are the stuff that good politics and governance are made of. We can take them as an inspiration, also in our part of the world.

Words of thanks

This is an ‘inaugural lecture light’, but I still want to say a few words of thanks.

I express my gratitude to my informants and conversation partners in Africa, notably in Ethiopia, for their great insights and pleasant company; to my Ethiopian colleagues for their friendship and support, and their major contributions to scholarship.

For his efforts on behalf of the ASCL Graduate School of African Studies at the UL and its new professorships I am grateful to former ASC director Ton Dietz; also to UL rector magnificus Prof. Carel Stolker, former dean of the UL Humanities Faculty Prof. Wim van den Doel, and to the ASCL Board (de ‘Bestuur’) for their leadership. All were very positive in the past years in supporting the Centre on its new trajectory.

In addition, I want to express my appreciation for my ASCL colleagues from all sections, who make the Centre such a dynamic and stimulating place to work.

And I am also deeply grateful to the excellent Department of Anthropology at VU University Amsterdam for hosting me in the past 17 years as professor of African ethnic studies.

Finally my gratitude and love go to my family, Azeb, Michaël and Helen, for a warm environment and for having supported me in many respects, and for providing lovely company and great times. Azeb is also my best colleague; her research work and approach to things are inspiring and helped me a lot. To my parents I owe a lifelong debt for their unswerving, selfless support and tolerance throughout the years.

Thank you for your attention.
References


