Africa
Spectrum

Reflections on the 22nd Conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD e.V.) in Cologne, Germany (30 May–2 June 2012)

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Abstract: The following article comments on contents and organisation of the 22nd Conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland, VAD e.V.), which took place from 30 May until 2 June 2012 at the University of Cologne, Germany. Thirty-seven panels and five round tables organised around four thematic foci (land rights, resource management, models of governance, media) served as a platform for discussions on developments on the African continent. A complex framework programme dealing with similar topics was open to the public and provided insight into recent research projects and their results.

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The last conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland, VAD e.V.) took place at the University of Cologne from 30 May until 2 June 2012. Under the title "Embattled Spaces – Contested Orders" international scientists and experts discussed diverse recent developments.

Transnational networking – along with processes of partial decoupling of such networks in some regions – leads to new conflicts over the allocation and constitution of physical, normative, and virtual spaces in Africa. Public debates and development discourses are dominated by conflicts not only over protected areas, natural resources, and corresponding land tenure reforms, but also over concepts of "tradition" and "culture" as both economic resources and sources of normative orientation in local contexts.

Many African politicians, artists, and journalists, as well as members of the populations of rural regions and poor urban neighbourhoods, and even inhabitants of elitist urban ghettos, conceptualise current conflicts as contestations of spatial orders and belonging. They relate these contestations to critical global and national developments and present the contested spaces as embattled (or at least worth fighting for). Often they propose cooperative solutions to these "spatial" problems – solutions that have the potential to ameliorate their living standards substantially. The scarcity of land and other resources, which are portrayed as crucial for development and human well-being, and the competition for these resources are dramatised and become politically exploited through their association with the loss of "authentic" cultural and ethical values. This fear of loss has obviously been increased by intense media networking – a phenomenon that has been accelerated by fundamental changes in communications media. Classic forms of media (print, radio, and television) have become more diversified, and the growing availability of mobile phones and the Internet has offered new opportunities. Thus, these discourses increasingly deal not only with physical space, but also with virtual spaces whose economic, social, and ideational utilisation calls for new methods of negotiation. Current ongoing processes of economic and cultural globalisation, rapid urbanisation, and their related discourses, as well as many violent conflicts, hark back to former disputes that took place in precolonial and colonial times. However, specific historical developments and forms of presentation and negotiation of conflicts are also apparent. Social movements, for example, now refer to globally promoted ideals of civil rights and personal freedom and reiterate the call for democracy. The concept of a civil society is confronted with notions of autochthony. Such intra-societal contestations always deal with differing conceptions of order – for example, the ordering of spatial structures such as are found in cultural landscapes; various social and political orders; or

religious conceptions of idealised communities. These various conceptions of order converge and allow diverse actors, stakeholders, and national institutions to selectively lay claim to them and use them for the implementation of their specific aims.

The 22nd VAD conference reflected on these current and historically established processes, following four distinct thematic trajectories:

1. Commoditising Space – Indigenising Land
2. Contested Environments – Negotiating Spatiality and Resources
3. (De-) Legitimised Orders – New Models of Governance / Alternative Moralities
4. Language and Media – Signification and Representations

These trajectories were examined and discussed by attendees organised into thirty-seven panels and five round tables. Researchers from Germany and other European countries, several African countries, the United States, Russia, and Japan participated.

Panels discussing the first topic concentrated on the progressive commercialisation of land. In many places in Africa, increased access to land by non-African stakeholders has become an important impetus: agro-industrial businesses as well as nations like China, India, and South Korea are buying or renting vast territories of African land for the production of staple food (e.g. rice), biofuels, or cash crops. Various efforts at nature conservation also claim huge areas. Whereas parks and protected areas often stem from colonial roots, conservation efforts (particularly those directed at forest conservation) are today intensified in an attempt to prevent or mitigate some of the negative consequences of global climate change.

Africa is still widely regarded by many as a continent of conflicts (over resources and the feared effects of climate change), but at the same time also as a continent of opportunities. Newly discovered oil and uranium deposits as well as the global increase in copper prices have led to another global competition for the continent's natural resources, entailing considerable local transformations. Furthermore, fresh water has become a locally and transnationally contested resource. Large-scale projects for energy production and resource extraction are once again underway (after a rapid phase of modernisation by similar projects in the 1950s and 1960s) with international support – though this is often met with local resistance. At the same time, and often in direct opposition to these processes, indigenous groups have been trying to secure land rights. In this context, it is the former marginalised groups of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists who are successfully claiming both access to land and cultural autonomy by appealing to the international discourse concerning indigenous groups.

The second group of panels dealt with questions of mobility and urbanisation. African cities have continued to grow for decades now, and soon more than half of the African population will live in cities. Besides the megacities (such as Cairo, Lagos, Kinshasa, and Johannesburg), it is mainly the numerous major cities and large and small towns that are experiencing the rapid growth leading to new cultural, social, and economic structures. Improved communication infrastructures and the growing mobility of the population render the division between rural areas and cities progressively obsolete. For instance, many actors now live in urban centres but continue to use rural resources. Urban forms of organisation (e.g. as found in the field of law and security) thus increasingly influence rural living conditions, and urban cultures influence rural patterns of communication. Whereas investigations into these processes have a prominent role in social research, in this context, linguistics and cultural studies concentrate more on the importance of languages. Youth languages and urban media practices increasingly shape urban culture on the African continent.

National patterns of migration interfere with international forms of migration. Chinese migrants, for example, are gaining greater influence in African countries: as entrepreneurs, workers, and traders they have a critical impact on the shaping of urban economies. Meanwhile, remittances from migrants working in Europe or North America and migrants returning from those regions play an important role in rural and urban African contexts. In the contemporary context, it has become essential for social scientists of different fields to regard mobile actors with great importance in their research. Several methodological and theoretical challenges resulting from this desideratum were discussed in the respective panels.

Another block of topics concentrated on political orders and their (de-) legitimisation, new models of governance, and alternative moralities. Political distortion in the Sahel region was a prominent topic. Alternative ideas of sovereignty are currently one focus of interest in academic discussion. Sovereignty is no longer ascribed uniquely to nations; nowadays, regional corporate bodies, militias, and rebellious armies may all claim complete or partial sovereignty. Coups d'état, revolts, and other violent conflicts related to democratic elections lead to debates about governmental legitimacy. Such dynamics are a challenge for the African Union (AU), founded in 2002. When attempting to deal with these conflict-laden and often violent relations, complex peace-building measures play a central role – the actual effectiveness of which is still insufficiently studied by social scientists. The (de-) legitimisation of political orders and newly defined moralities is not only of major importance in international politics; even on the local and regional level, political spaces may adopt completely new forms as a result of

these processes. Also, religious contexts may undergo fundamental changes – as has certainly been the case in some areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Of direct relevance here are the pluralisation of religious orientations within the wider context of African Christianity and Islam, as well as both the rediscovery of old traditions and the formation of new ones in the field of African traditional religions. On the local level, the conception of the family has taken on new aspects. In connection with legal modifications, new forms of mobility, demographic changes, and concepts of household and kinship are also reinterpreted. Formal education may have an effect on gender roles and kinship relations, as may external factors such as the architecture of dwellings in urban surroundings. New forms of media such as the World Wide Web open new spaces for discussing aspects of sexuality that have long been and continue to be taboo (e.g. homosexuality or transgenderism). Linguistic studies reveal that these developments in communication and the diversification of contact situations lead to changing relationship terminologies.

The fourth block of panels discussed strategies related to language and media, which directly draw on embattled spaces and contested orders. In this regard, literary debates about colonial inheritance, globalisation, and modernisation play an important role. Mobility and urbanisation are central topics of the continent's literature. Often, discourses centre on the violent history of Africa. Mourning, for example, is dealt with in the public sphere through a variety of memorialisation practices mediated through pictures and other media in museums, rituals, publications, and films.

New media technologies open up spaces of communication in which blueprints for new identities and political expectations are suggested, picked up, and disseminated. The views of religious movements can be circulated more easily via the new media, and ethnic identities – in particular those of indigenous groups – may attain rapid, nationwide, and often even international prominence through local and national cultural festivals. Besides these (mobile) orchestrations, museums also play an important role today with their presentation of ethnic groups' and other social collectives' histories through exhibitions of aspects of their material cultures. Such tendencies towards indigenisation and cultural processes of authentication receive further legitimisation through international cultural organisations (e.g. UNESCO). It is obvious that this may lead to disputes over sovereignty of interpretation and forms of representation. In these conflict-laden and highly dynamic contexts, various groups of actors emphasise the importance of formal education for increasing individuals' chances of success. Lastly, improved education is generally regarded as the most promising and effective tool by which to achieve a higher living standard and more democratic conditions in many different spheres – from elections, to local and national politics, to entire

regimes. Conditions for inclusion and exclusion in the field of education are discussed intensely by the parties involved.

Five round tables focused on pertinent social processes on the African continent. Topics such as the Arab Spring and the future development of the Sahara region were discussed by prominent participants. At one public round table, John Borneman (University of Princeton), Mohamed El Boukili (Human Rights Association of Morocco), Rula Assad (a Syrian journalist and human rights activist), and Ibrahim El Nur (American University in Cairo) analysed the recent revolutionary movements in North Africa and the Middle East within the context of long-term developments and transregional alliances before, after, and beyond colonial relationships with European and "Western" powers. Powerful local dynamics revitalise solidarity on a national level and transform loosely imagined communities into real ones. At the same time, diaspora communities abroad contribute new social identities to the arena. Transnational actors play a key role in processes of mediation, especially in terms of digital media productions and their global distribution.

The round table discussing the Sahara region applied the general conference topic "Embattled Spaces – Contested Orders" to this specific region. Researchers and non-academic individuals from the region itself discussed their differing perspectives. The aforementioned Arab Spring, the war in Libya and the conflict over its political future, and the announcement of a new state (Azawad) in northern Mali were further subjects of discussion.

An often neglected but very special field of life was examined by a round table centred on the politics of mourning. "Spaces of death", first described by Michael Taussig in 1987, are sites and symbols of morally and physically contested orders. Whether they emerge as a consequence of genocide, war, or natural or man-made disasters (such as the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima or HIV/AIDS) they constitute a landscape of suffering, pain, and mourning. Their enactment serves both as a reminder of the past – by recalling and paying tribute to the dead – and as a promise of future activities, because they allow people to ask the dead for protection and guidance. Rituals and sacrifices transform these spaces into places of power that instantiate and embody forces that operate beyond the human realm. Because spaces of death offer room for religious negotiations as well as aesthetic and political appropriation, they may play an eminent role in processes of reconciliation and reintegration. Spaces of death thus constitute sites in which the shape and composition of a moral community are envisioned, challenged, and reclaimed.

Another round table, representing an inter-university research context, dealt with the global concepts and technologies involved in the social and cultural developments on the African continent. The goal of Priority Pro-

gramme 1448 (funded by the German Research Foundation) is to improve theories explaining the roles of adaptation and creativity in the translation of travelling technologies and significations (ideas inscribed into technologies, into models for achieving certain aims, into works of art, and into all kinds of artefacts and commodities). In terms of space, the flows envisaged are between villages, regions, countries, and continents; in terms of time, the flows are between different eras, from the past to the present; in systematic terms, technologies and significations travel between social spheres and social arenas. The collaborative programme investigates how these various types of translation in the past and in the present contribute to the production of order and disorder, both in African contexts and beyond.

Another important topic was discoursed by the fifth round table, under the title "Conceptualising Competing Social and Political Orders". The rising number of social and political conflicts in Africa (or, at least, the increasing interest in these conflicts) is a focus of ongoing scholarly debate. The discussion on "failing" or "failed" states measures the African situation against an idealised benchmark of OECD statehood. However, there are also a number of alternative conceptualisations that represent attempts to link these conflicts with the current processes of social and political differentiation in Africa. Several scholars have identified a variety of separate structures – with their own rules, authorities, power relations, and links with sub-societies – which organise societies in distinctive ways. These "orders" are interconnected and overlap or compete with each other. According to some scholars, the state – or at least parts of it – may be considered only one amongst a number of such orders. Authors have characterised these developments in terms of oligopolies of violence, contested regimes of governance, islands of order, heterarchies, twilight institutions, or spaces of autonomy, to name a few. These concepts have in common that they all describe the African socio-political reality of overlapping social spaces of authority in some way. The authors directly or indirectly share the opinion that an appropriate conceptualisation of social and political diversity is a key requirement for the analysis of the ongoing conflicts.

The above-mentioned events and topics led to lively discussions and facilitated networking on an international basis. Through cooperation with the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, similar round tables and cultural events could be opened to the public, thereby presenting an opportunity to discuss scientific findings and discourses with a broader audience.

Reflexionen zur 22. Tagung der Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland (VAD e.V.) in Köln (30. Mai bis 2. Juni 2012)

Zusammenfassung: Die Autoren berichten über inhaltliche Schwerpunkte und Ablauf der 22. Tagung der Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland (VAD e.V.), die vom 30. Mai bis zum 2. Juni 2012 an der Universität zu Köln stattfand. Vier Themenkomplexe (Landrechte, Ressourcennutzung, Regierungsformen und neue Medien) wurden in 37 Vortrags- und Diskussionsforen sowie fünf Round-Table-Gesprächen diskutiert. Im Rahmen eines thematisch angepassten umfassenden Rahmenprogramms konnte sich eine interessierte Öffentlichkeit über aktuelle Forschungsprojekte und deren Ergebnisse informieren.

Schlagwörter: Deutschland, Afrikanistik/Afrikaforschung, Konferenzbericht