

Thomas Bierschenk and Eva Spies (eds) (2012), *50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika: Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven*, Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, ISBN 9783896458292, 572 pp.

In 1960, 17 African states gained independence; a total of 33 did so in the decade from 1955 to 1965. Five decades after that momentous year, the decolonising momentum was commemorated extensively. The 2010 biennial conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD) in Mainz was also dedicated to this anniversary and to the legacy of decolonisation 50 years down the road. This conference formed the basis for the edited volume under review.

*50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika: Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven [50 Years of Independence in Africa: Continuities, Ruptures, Prospects]* contains 23 contributions by 26 different authors and is organised into five sections. All of the contributions are in German and are followed by – often extensive – bibliographies, as well as abstracts in English and in German. The introduction (Bierschenk and Spies) is a remarkable exercise in pulling together a variety of topics and crystallising the discussion around two main theses.

Contributions about urban dynamics (Hahn; Beck), religion (Lange-wiesche; Loimeier), kinship (Alber, Häberlein, and Martin), and education (Bierschenk) are grouped under the header “Societal Trends.” National celebrations (Lentz), shifting representations of African nationalisms (Fricke), and national eating and drinking identities (Nugent) make up the section entitled “Nations and Nation-Building.” Political leadership, elites, and political culture (Meyns; Behrends and Pauli; Bierschenk), women’s movements and transnationalisation (Ruppert and Rompel), and development and subsistence economies (Asche; Rauch) are included in the politics and economics section. A section on media, arts, and popular culture brings together contributions on mass media (Grätz), post-independence literature (Oed), African film (Kilian), and popular music (Dorsch). A final section focuses on challenges and prospects (Schäfer; Lopes) and includes a conceptual reflection on the tension between the independent state’s right to kill and the independent people’s right to live (Nganang).

The wide range of topics is justified as an attempt to represent the diversity and complexity of contemporary Africa and to take stock of German African studies. Indeed, only three of the authors are not German, and one of these three received his doctorate from a German university. The volume provides few original research findings, but it does offer a genuine general introduction to different aspects of contemporary Africa, including its precedents, prospects, and plurality. The book would

thus be useful as an introductory textbook in BA programmes at German universities.

Two overarching theses are put forward by the editors and are – if not taken up as such – corroborated by many of the contributors. First, the editors claim that the years around 1960 were, in fact, not a decisive turning point for Africa. They argue that the impact of the colonial era lived on for several decades and that the early 1990s ultimately turned out to be a more important rupture. Several historians have already stated that it was the years around 1940 that made a crucial difference in instigating the decolonisation process in Africa (e.g. Frederick Cooper); others have highlighted the years around 1990 as decisive in bringing postcolonial continuity to an end (e.g. Crawford Young). Even if the argument is not entirely new, it is still useful to remind us that the weight of neither state independence nor the “Year of Africa” should be overestimated. In this sense, the fact that several contributions pay attention to transnational and global dynamics is equally noteworthy.

Second, the editors recommend looking beyond the dominance of purely economic and political parameters. Instead, they make a case for the cultural and societal potential of Africans and, in so doing, lean toward Afro-optimism. The examples of creativity are compelling. However, the connection between the social-cultural potential and the political-economic challenges remains unclear. Several contributions do make insightful links between culture and politics (political music, food identity, national festivities) or between economy and society (the liberalisation of education, of the media, and of the peasantry), but not in a way that makes a clear case for how cultural creativity could contribute to solving political or economic problems.

The volume promises so much that it cannot reasonably fulfil all of it. Its interdisciplinary ambitions are overshadowed by a preponderance of anthropologists, who, despite contributing solid insights, cannot provide the historical depth that is needed for the proclaimed evaluation of the past 50 years. Many authors do refer to the colonial era and the period of decolonisation, but most do not put the past on an equal footing with the present, which undermines statements about change and continuity. How can one substantiate the argument that African societies have become much more diverse and complex (8), if the “other” element of the comparison – that is, an equally dynamic past – is missing? Most of the individual contributions are consistent in their claims, but taken together there is a tension between the ontological and epistemic assertions. Some authors describe and analyse dynamics in African societies, others do equally valuable work on the evolution of the research and scholarly debates on

African phenomena. However, one cannot conclude that what we did not see or know about in the past did not exist. As a matter of fact, historians have uncovered the diversity and complexity of African pasts to the same extent that anthropologists are grasping the diversity and complexity of Africa today.

Nevertheless, the editors and authors do fulfil most of their promises: The volume provides a variegated impression of contemporary African societal dynamics. It juxtaposes several disciplinary vantage points, and it integrates and presents research on many parts of Africa (albeit with a predilection for West African cases). It engages in an intelligent way with the challenges and prospects Africans are facing, and several papers are particularly convincing when it comes to the analysis of the creation of ideas and imagination. In the end, this volume is a valuable contribution to the German literature on contemporary Africa.

- Geert Castryck