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Erinnerungspolitik und Nationalfeiern in Afrika/ The poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa

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Zusammenfassung

Ab dem 1. 10. 2009 werden drei DoktorandInnen am Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien an der Universität Mainz zum Thema *nation-building*, Erinnerungspolitik und Unabhängigkeitsfeiern in Afrika forschen. Nach gemeinsamer Vorbereitung des Forschungsprogramms in Mainz und in Kooperation mit einer studentischen Lehrforschung werden sie im Jahr 2010 vergleichende Feldforschungen in verschiedenen afrikanischen Ländern zu den Fünfzigjahrfeiern der Unabhängigkeit durchführen. Die Auswertung der Daten und Abfassung der Dissertation erfolgt dann anschließend in engem wissenschaftlichem Austausch untereinander und mit den Antragstellern sowie weiteren Doktoranden am Institut und im Forschungszentrum SOCUM (Social and Cultural Studies Mainz). Der fachliche Schwerpunkt der Doktorandengruppe liegt bei der Ethnologie, wobei die Betreuer der Doktorandengruppe unterschiedliche disziplinäre Spezialgebiete einbringen (politische Ethnologie, Wirtschaftsethnologie, Medien- und Performanzethnologie, Ethnologie des Kolonialismus und der Dekolonialisierung); die beteiligte Theaterwissenschaft unterstützt die kompetente Erarbeitung der performativen Aspekte der Nationalfeiern. In der Ethnologie – klassische Domäne des heroischen Einzelforschers – ist ein solches thematisch und zeitlich koordiniertes Vorgehen bei Feldforschung und Auswertung immer noch innovativ und hat Pilotcharakter für Planungen in Richtung einer strukturierten Doktorandenausbildung.

Dass im Jahr 2010 siebzehn afrikanische Staaten den fünfzigsten Jahrestag ihrer Unabhängigkeit feiern, bietet eine einmalige Chance, Erinnerungspolitik und Nationalfeiern, die von Anfang an integraler Bestandteil der Herausbildung afrikanischer

Nationen waren, vergleichend zu erforschen. Die Feiern sind zum einen selbst kathartische Momente der Nationenbildung; zum anderen geben sie Anlass zu Kontroversen über Organisation, Programmgestaltung, Bildsprache und Aufführungspraxen, in denen sich Konflikte zwischen konkurrierenden politischen Projekten, soziale Differenzen (Klasse, Geschlecht, Alter) und regionale, ethnische und religiöse Diversität niederschlagen. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung der Feiern ermöglicht Einblicke in die Herausforderungen und unterschiedlichen Strategien der Nationenwerdung im postkolonialen Afrika – ein Thema, das erstaunlicherweise bisher kaum auf solider empirischer Basis untersucht worden ist.

Summary

Starting in October 2009, a research group of three doctoral students at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, University of Mainz, will explore the poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa. Having jointly prepared their research programmes, in cooperation with a project of supervised fieldwork of master students, the doctoral researchers will investigate the 2010 'jubilee' independence celebrations in different African countries. They will then analyse their data and write up their dissertations in close cooperation and scholarly exchange with one another, further doctoral students at the department, the professorial mentors of the research group, as well as members of the research centre SOCUM (Social and Cultural Studies Mainz). While the disciplinary focus of the doctoral research group will be on anthropology, participants will benefit from the different specialisations of the mentors (political anthropology, economic anthropology, media anthropology, performance studies, the anthropology of colonialism and decolonisation, etc.). The collaboration with theatre studies will provide the necessary competence for the exploration of the performative aspects of the national celebrations. Research in anthropology is still often characterised by the classical ideal of the 'heroic' lonely fieldworker; a collaborative approach, and the systematic comparison and coordination of research programmes in different countries, is innovative and will contribute to exploring new formats in the training of doctoral students.

In the year 2010, as many as seventeen African states will celebrate their independence jubilees. These events invite an exploration of the politics and poetics of commemoration, which were, and continue to be, an integral part of nation-building. The doctoral group will undertake first-hand, comparative research, complemented by historical investigations, on the up-coming celebrations. The debates surrounding their organisation, and the imagery and performances they employ, reflect the fault lines with which African nation-building has to contend, such as competing political orientations, issues of social class and gender, and religious, regional and ethnic diversity. At the same time, the celebrations in themselves represent constitutive and cathartic moments of nation-building, aiming to enhance citizens' emotional attachments to the country, and inviting to remember, re-enact and re-define national history. They become a forum of debate about what should constitute the norms and values that make up national identity, and, in the interstices of official ceremonies, provide space for the articulation of new demands for public recognition. A study of the independence celebrations thus allows scholars to explore contested processes of nation-building and images of nationhood.

The research theme:

The poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa

Beginning with the Sudan (1956) and Ghana (1957), followed by Guinea (1958) and many former French colonies in 1960, most Sub-Saharan African countries became independent by the early 1960s. In the year 2010, as many as seventeen African states will celebrate their independence jubilees (and another nine will do so by 2014) – providing a unique opportunity to explore the politics of commemoration which are an integral part of the building of new nation-states.

Globalisation notwithstanding, 'nations matter' (Calhoun 2007), and the nation-state continues to delineate an important moral community to which African political elites, and societal groups in general, address their demands and feel accountable. Despite the undeniable strength of regional loyalties and ethnic ties, we can indeed observe 'national pride' in many African countries and thriving, although contested, projects of nation-building, both from above and below. Nation-building involves a symbolic dimension, namely, the creation of cultural emblems and symbols such as flags, national anthems, stamps, and the (re)writing of 'national' history as well as the establishment of national holidays that commemorate formative events of the nation's history or national 'heroes'. Memory-making and national holidays often spark heated debates about what should be remembered or forgotten, how the commemorations should be organised, and who should be involved – debates that reveal the fault lines of the nation under construction.

It is the politics and poetics of commemorative celebrations, and the processes of creating a national 'imaginary', that stand at the centre of attention of the proposed doctoral researchers' group. With this focus, we hope to revitalise, with fresh empirical research, the debate on African nationalism and nation-building that were prominent themes in the 1960s, but were largely neglected in later decades.

Current state of research and aims of the proposed doctoral projects

That the annual official independence celebrations are important to the construction of the new African states was noted quite early in an essay by the French political scientist Yves-A. Fauré (1978). For Fauré, the celebrations were not an expression of 'genuine' national cohesion, but organised from 'above' (1978: 383), but he conceded that the holidays could, in the long run, contribute to nation-building. His perceptive remarks on the celebrations' requisite elements – the sequence of presidential addresses, expositions of national paraphernalia, parades (staging society as a unified and uniformed loyal population), official receptions and popular festivities, as well as the holidays' symbolic reenactments of a return to mythical 'beginnings' – still provide useful impulses for future studies. However, such studies have yet to be conducted. In the past decades African national holidays, and more generally nation-building in Africa, have received no or only scarce scholarly attention (for exceptions, see Witz 2003 and Apter 2005; Fuller 2004 contains 'reflections on' national holidays, but no research-based pieces; for first results of our own research on the independence jubilees, see Lentz and Budniok 2007 a, b; Lentz 2008).

With so many African countries' independence jubilees approaching, we are presented with a unique opportunity to engage in systematic, comparative research on these celebrations and tap their potential for providing insight into ongoing

processes of nation-building. This research can build on, and contribute to, work on the cultural dimensions of nation-building that has emerged in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, political science and social history in the past two decades, such as Benedict Anderson's (1983) reflections on nations as 'imagined communities' and Hobsbawm's and Ranger's study (1983) of 'invented' traditions. Connerton (1989) and Assmann (1999) have emphasised that commemorative rituals and other incorporated, bodily practices that sustain collective memory are a necessary counterpart to verbalised, text-based creations of a 'useable' past. The cultural policies that fashioned nations out of societies marked by ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity have been explored by Handler (1988), Crinson (2001) and Coe (2005), Askew (2002), and Hellman (2003), to mention just a few anthropological case studies. As their analyses clearly demonstrate, scholars of nation-building need to pay attention both to the work of imagination, invention and memory, and to techniques of power, such as state technologies of classifying the population and drawing administrative boundaries (Foster 1991).

National holidays in general, and commemorations of independence in particular, must be understood, therefore, as objects of state policies and as sites of societal contestation over images and practices of nationhood. That commemorative ceremonies are shaped by, and in turn shape, the larger political and social dynamics of nation-building, has become especially clear from historical studies that trace the development of the festival calendar or specific national holidays over a longer period (on the history of commemoration generally, see Gillis 1994). It is from this body of literature in particular that the proposed doctoral research on African independence celebrations can draw inspiration.

One important theme emerging from historical research concerns the relations between newly introduced national holidays and existing festive cultures. Whether the architects of new ceremonies emphasised continuity or innovation was often controversial, particularly with regard to religious holidays (Ozouf 1988 and Harazeesingh 2004). A second, closely related theme regards the problematic relationship between state initiative and control of national commemorations, on the one hand, and civic or popular contributions to and participation in these festivals, on the other. Some national ceremonies developed out of originally regional festivals; others have been from the outset planned 'from above' and by the political centre (Waldstreicher 1997, Schneider 1995 and Beezley 2008). But even then could subordinate groups subversively re-appropriate elements of the dominant nationalist discourse and culture (Goldstein 1998). Festivals could also be 'boycotted' by the broader population, or family- and community-oriented festivities overshadowed the public political ritual (Behrenbeck and Nützenadel 2000). A third theme, finally, that emerges from historical research is the relationship between regional and ethnic or other group loyalties and national identifications – a theme that has been explored particularly in the United States, for instance, with respect to the legacy of the Civil War, and commemorative fêtes of African Americans (Blight 2003, Kachun 2003). Ethnic parades and other immigrant festivals, increasingly popular since the latter nineteenth century, could be both 'divisive' and 'integrative' with regard to national unity (Fabre et al 2001: 13). However, as the historical studies make very clear, national holidays *per se* do not necessarily reinforce national unity; they can just as well heighten tensions, and in-

tensify debates about what vision of the nation and which future course should prevail.

Building on these insights, the doctoral projects will undertake first-hand research on the up-coming African independence jubilees. The ways in which celebrations are negotiated and organised at the local, regional and national levels as well as in the diaspora, and the imagery and performances they employ, reflect the societal and political fault lines with which African nation-building must contend. At the same time, the celebrations are in themselves constitutive and cathartic moments of nation-building. They aim to enhance the emotional attachment of citizens to the country, invite to remember, re-enact and re-define national history, as well as to 'socialise' younger generations into the national heritage. They become a forum of debate carried out via the media, the internet and in informal popular discussions about the norms and values that make up a national identity. In the interstices of the official ceremonies, they also provide a space for the emergence of new expressions of group cohesion or desire for public recognition. Studies of the independence celebrations thus provides insight into contested processes of nation-building and images of nationhood – a theme not yet studied in any systematic fashion in Africa.

Entering the international community of nation-states relatively late, African countries have been able to draw on a rich fund of festive formats, bequeathed on them by their former colonial masters, or inspired by the parade and festival format of the communist bloc, by subaltern groups such as the African Americans or by the foundational rituals of the Asian pioneers of post-war independence. Thus, African countries have constructed, and continue to construct, their independence commemorations both 'from above' and 'from below' in a global ecumene of images of nationhood and festive practices that travel through the media and through transnational diasporic networks. To do justice to these complex processes, the doctoral researchers are encouraged to explore what Löfgren (1989: 21–2) called the 'international cultural grammar of nationhood, with a thesaurus of general ideas about the cultural ingredients needed to form a nation'; the 'specific national lexicon, local forms of cultural expression, which tend to vary from nation to nation'; and, finally, the 'dialect vocabulary', that 'focuses on the internal divisions within the nation: conflict groups and interests using national arguments and rhetoric, sometimes also creating different styles of national discourse'.

With this multi-layered framework and the above-mentioned themes of continuity/ innovation, state control/civic or popular initiative, and competing national/sub- or trans-national loyalties in mind, the doctoral projects could explore the following dimensions of African independence celebrations: a) the politics of memory and debates about the 'national' history, including publications, speeches (and their discussion in newspapers and internet blogs) and pictorial or performative representations of history; b) the organisation of the festivities at the local, regional, and national level as well as in the diaspora, and cooperative or conflict-ridden relationships between various organisers and actors, state and non-state; c) the symbolic registers and performative formats of the central commemorative ceremonies themselves; and d) the role of media and transnational diasporas in the commemorations, and nation-building more generally.

Possible dissertation projects

In addition to a core comparative research programme that will be jointly elaborated and that all dissertation projects are expected to undertake, the doctoral researchers could focus on one or two of the following themes:

- The politics of memory and debates about 'national' history
- The independence celebrations as arenas of political and ethnic conflict
- The symbolic registers and performative formats of national commemorative ceremonies
- The role of media and transnational diasporas in the commemoration of independence

The selection of candidates will be carried out jointly by the professorial members of the research group. Each anthropological mentor will supervise one of the three doctoral students, supported by the other professorial members of the research group, and in collaboration with the member from Theatre Studies who will specifically provide his expertise for projects focussing on performative aspects of the celebrations.

Work programme

The following work programme and scheduling of activities is suggested:

<p>10/2009 – ca. 4/2010</p>	<p>residence in Mainz preparation of field work; networking with other initiatives of research on the independence celebrations, e.g. by using the existing mailing list on Independence jubilees (african-independence@mayordomo.uni-mainz.de) active participation in the departmental seminar series and a seminar course on '<i>Nation-building</i> und Erinnerungspolitik' coordination of own research activities with those of a master's students' fieldwork course on the same topic (supervised by Carola Lentz) workshop on fieldwork methodology; participation in activities of the International PhD Programme Performance and Media Studies 4/2010 active participation in the German Africanist congress taking place in Mainz, networking with African and European participants in thematically relevant panels individual participation in seminars of the Mainz University general PhD programme</p>
<p>ca. 4/2010 – ca. 12/2010</p>	<p>fieldwork in different African countries, in close cooperation with master students from Mainz working on the same theme cooperation with African researchers individual supervision by mentors; if feasible: an intermediary workshop in an African country to evaluate data collected so far and further research programme</p>

<p>ca. 1/2011 – ca. 10/2011</p>	<p>residence in Mainz workshop on data analysis; workshop on writing strategies active participation in doctoral seminars (co-)teaching one seminar course writing up of a 'first result' paper, presentation in a workshop and editing for a joint book publication active participation in at least one international conference beginning of the writing up of the dissertation if necessary: writing applications for grant prolongation or alternative grants</p>
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