# Studying National Commemoration and Political Celebrations in Africa: The Online Archive African Independence Days

Marie-Christin Gabriel AND Carola Lentz

## Abstract

The Department of Anthropology and African Studies (ifeas) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz hosts a comprehensive archive on African Independence Day celebrations. Created in 2010, the archive is one of the outcomes of a large comparative research project on African national days directed by Carola Lentz. It offers unique insights into practices of as well as debates on national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa. The archive holds more than 28,000 images, including photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects from twelve African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. It primarily consists of an online photo and newspaper archive (https://bildarchiv.uni-mainz.de/AUJ/; https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmental-archives/online-archive-african-independence-days/); some of the material is also stored in the physical archive on African Independence Days at ifeas as well as in the department's ethnographic collection (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/ethnographic-collection/). Most of the material concerns recent celebrations, but the collection has been complemented by some documentation of earlier festivities. Archives hold many stories while they also have a story to tell in their own right. This article discusses both aspects. It first traces the history of the Online Archive African Independence Days at ifeas. It then provides an overview of the different categories of material stored in the archive and tells a few of the many stories that the photos, texts and objects contain. We hope to demonstrate that the archive holds a wealth of sources that can be mined for studies on national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa, and, more generally, on practices and processes of nation-building and state-making.

The Department of Anthropology and African Studies (ifeas) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz hosts a comprehensive archive on Independence Day celebrations in Africa. Created in 2010, the archive is one of the outcomes of a large comparative research project on African national days which Carola Lentz initiated in 2007, on the occasion of Ghana's independence jubilee, and which lasted until 2019. The archive holds more than 28,000 images, including photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects from twelve African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Democratic Republic of

MARIE-CHRISTIN GABRIEL is a PhD student at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her dissertation examines national-day celebrations in Burkina Faso, exploring them as sites of producing the nation and the state. Email: gabriel@uni-mainz.de

CAROLA LENTZ is Senior Research Professor at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She is a member – and was from 2018 to 2020 vice-president – of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. From November 2020, she serves as president of the Goethe Institute. Email: lentz@uni-mainz.de

**Figure 1:** Logo of the Online Archive African Independence Days.

the Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, and Tanzania (Figure 1). It primarily consists of an online photo archive (https://bildarchiv.uni-mainz.de/AUJ/; https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmental-archives/online-archive-african-independence-days/), while some of the material is also stored in the physical archive on African Independence Days at ifeas as well as in the department's ethnographic collection (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/ethnographic-collection/). Most of the material concerns recent national celebrations, but the collection has been complemented by some documentation of earlier festivities. Taken together, the vast material stored in the archive offers unique insights into practices of, and debates on, national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa and, more generally, practices and processes of nation-building.

Processes of nation-building are inextricably intertwined with practices of state-making. Nations and states are abstract entities that are constantly made and re-made. Their (re)production occurs through a range of means, by different actors, on several levels, and through various processes and practices. Nations and states are created, for instance, through institutions such as schools and armies as well as through infrastructures such as the national media and systems of transport that support nationwide communication (Anderson 2006 [1983]; Gellner 1983). Just as important as these materials, more or less tangible, means of building nations and making states is their symbolic production through national symbols like flags and anthems (see Billig 1995; Elgenius 2011) and a variety of performances that are organised, for instance, on the occasion of national holidays. National-day celebrations especially are crucial sites and moments for the symbolic (re)production of the nation and the state. They originate from 'the embrace between the nation and the state' (Elgenius 2005: 364) and constitute a 'unique kind of official festivity in honour of the nation-state' (*ibid.*), offering 'condensed moments of nation-building…[and] state-making' (Lentz and Becker 2013: 1).

In most regions of the world, national days commemorate the country's independence (Zerubavel 2003: 321–3). They invite reflection the nation-state's history, but also on contemporary challenges and visions of the future. National days are extraordinary events that stage the nation. In everyday life, this 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006 [1983]) is often less visible and palpable than other social differences and categories of belonging such as age, gender, profession, ethnic belonging or religious affinity. National belonging is usually taken for granted and almost 'invisible'. National-day celebrations, by contrast, prominently perform membership in the national community. They foreground the nation through a series of events such as parades, decorations of deserving citizens, wreath-laying at national monuments as well as cultural performances, concerts, and many more. The

celebrations thus become 'sites and arenas for the performance of nationhood' (Roy 2007: 66) that produce 'national imaginaries' (Askew 2002: 273). At the same time, national-day celebrations also stage 'the state', demonstrating its role as the 'nation's authoritative representative' (Roy 2007: 14). By organising the celebrations and orchestrating the use of national rituals and symbols, the state proves its regulatory power and legitimizes itself (Lentz 2013b: 218). In some cases, the state's authority in designing the festivities is instrumentalised to bolster the ruling government, and such attempts may trigger debates and protests (Lentz 2013a: 209). Taken together, national-day celebrations are crucial sites of producing, and contesting, the nation and the state, and thus offer privileged opportunities for research on nation-building and state-making.

The symbolic reproduction of nations and states is relevant for nations and states all over the world; yet it seems to be of special importance for the relatively 'young' nations and states in Africa. Despite drawing on sometimes pre-colonial and often colonial precedents, the origins of the African nations/states within the borders that we know today date back only to the 1960s; furthermore, the often pronounced regional, ethnic and religious diversity as well as the relatively weak penetration of civil society by state institutions constitute particular challenges that African nation-building and state-making have to confront (Lentz 2013a: 215; Lentz 2017: 121; 123–4). African nations and states are, of course, no more exceptional than other nations/states in the world, and practices of nation-building and state-making in Africa do not principally differ from procedures practised elsewhere (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014: 17), and national-day formats in particular follow globally 'travelling models' (Behrends, Park and Rottenburg 2014). Still, the symbolic reproduction of nations and states through national-day celebrations seems to play a particularly crucial role in the stabilization of the relatively young African states (Lentz 2013a: 215).

So far, we have outlined why it is worth studying national-day celebrations in general, and in Africa in particular. Yet why create an archive on African Independence Days? In fact, the documentation of national-day celebrations almost suggests itself for such a collection, because national-day celebrations operate with sensuous means that make 'the nation' and 'the state' visible, audible, and palpable. The very term 'national-day celebration' is likely to evoke among many citizens powerful images such as national flags fluttering in the wind, brass bands dressed in festive uniforms playing the national anthem, parade delegations marching past before the state authorities and international guests, cultural troops dancing in flamboyant traditional clothes, presidents waving to the crowds. In other words, the extensive use of symbols and performances provide national-day celebrations with a strong visual attractiveness (as the common image of spectators capturing the event with their smart phones and tablets also seems to prove). A social anthropologist who comes to witness a national-day celebration is also likely to be drawn in by its extravaganza. And this is precisely what happened in 2007, when Carola Lentz more or less by chance observed the celebrations held on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of independence in Ghana – an experience that would eventually motivate the establishment of a large collaborative research project on African national-day celebrations which continued for over ten years and resulted in the creation of the Online Archive African Independence Days.

Archives hold many stories, while they also have a story to tell in their own right. This article discusses both. On the one hand, it traces the history of the Online Archive African Independence Days, outlining how it came into existence. On the other hand, it provides an overview of the material stored in the archive, telling some of the many stories that it contains, outlining the archive's richness for studies on national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa, and, more generally, on practices of nation-building and state-making.

## THE STORY OF THE ARCHIVE

It all began in 2007 when, during fieldwork in Ghana, Lentz witnessed the festivities held on the occasion of Ghana's independence jubilee (Lentz and Budniok 2007) and found that national days offered an interesting window into social and political debates on the Ghanaian nation-state and, more generally, into processes of nation-building and state-making. Lentz

**Figure 2:** Physical archive of the Online Archive African Independence Days at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, © Carola Lentz.

was in Ghana for research on the middle class, in collaboration with Jan Budniok who was working on his PhD thesis on Ghanaian judges. By chance their field trip fell into the period of the festivities organised for the golden jubilee of independence, with its peak celebrated on March 6 in Accra and all over the country in all regional capitals. 'Ghana@50', as Ghanaians usually called the event, was just too present not to capture Lentz and Budniok's attention. The public space burst with posters announcing the festivities; gift shops were full of merchandise like cups and calendars displaying the jubilee logo; the national media reported on the progress of the preparations for Ghana@50 on an almost daily basis; and Ghanaians tirelessly discussed many aspects of the forthcoming jubilee. The festivities, under the self-confident motto 'Championing African Excellence', inspired many Ghanaians to proudly celebrate Ghana's vanguard role on the African continent (Ghana was the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to become independent, in 1957), while others criticized the expenses for the festivities as a waste of money that would be taken advantage of for corrupt affairs. Other discussions focused on the question of who the 'true' father(s) of independence were. After the celebrations, Ghanaians still discussed many details of the festivities, for instance, the clothes of the president (for the parade, he had worn what many Ghanaians labelled as a 'Western' suit while they would have preferred him to wear traditional clothes to demonstrate the country's independence), the use of ethno-regional symbols (especially in the jubilee logo), or the celebration's lack of political inclusiveness (politicians of the opposition lamented not having been invited to the celebrations) (Lentz 2013c; Lentz and Budniok 2007). For Lentz, who had been conducting research in Ghana since the late 1980s (on other topics), it soon became clear that national-day celebrations were immensely valuable for studying nation-building, state-making, commemoration and political celebrations as well as societal and political conflicts (Lentz 2019: 11).

**Figure 3:** Civilian delegation representing the Bobo, an ethnic group, taking part in the parade held for the 50th anniversary of independence in Burkina Faso, Bobo-Dioulasso, 2010, © Carola Lentz.

Encouraged by these observations, Lentz set up a comparative research project on African national-day celebrations. In 2009, she initiated a doctoral group composed of six PhD students focusing on 'The poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa' (2009–13), and an associated student fieldwork project (2009–10) with nine MA students carrying out comparative research on national commemoration and political celebrations in various African countries. In 2010, seventeen African countries celebrated their fiftieth anniversary of independence, and during this 'African jubilee year' (in Francophone countries also referred to as *Cinquantenaire*), altogether fifteen junior scholars from Mainz University conducted fieldwork on the Independence Day celebrations in nine African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia (celebrating twenty years of independence), Nigeria, and Tanzania (celebrating fifty years of independence in 2011). In their fieldwork, the Master's and PhD students all addressed a series of identical basic questions on the festivities' overall design so as to compile a body of findings that could serve as basis for comparison. In addition, each researcher also developed individual themes that would enable exploration of the different countries' specific historical trajectories and current political and cultural configurations. Taken together, the comparative research provided many insights into distinct practices of national commemoration and political celebration, while also uncovering recurring themes that were of relevance in most of the countries under study.

One overarching topic relevant in most countries was how national-day organisers dealt with ethnic and regional diversity. Particularly when ethno-regional groups claim to be nations in their own right and strive for autonomy or even secession, ethno-regional belonging can become a serious challenge to national unity. But there can also be milder forms of competing loyalties. In any case, the subordination of ethno-regional memberships

**Figure 4:** Delegation of camel riders participating in a rehearsal for the parade held for the 53rd anniversary of independence in Burkina Faso, Dori, 2013, © Marie-Christin Gabriel.

under national belonging is a vital concern of the nation-state, in Africa and beyond. This is why many states aim at controlling ethnic and regional diversity by staging it as a constitutive but subordinated element of the nation. The popular slogan 'unity in diversity' is a vivid expression of this strategy. In Ghana, for instance, 'unity in diversity' is considered as an almost magic formula with which to contain the centrifugal power of ethnicity and wield it into an element that strengthens nation-building – and national-day celebrations are important sites for visualising this formula. In order to explore how Ghana's neighbours Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire handle ethnic diversity as both a constitutive and potentially threatening element of nation-building, Lentz initiated, as follow-up of the doctoral research group on the independence jubilees, a comparative research project. This project, entitled 'Performing the nation and ethnic diversity in African national days' (2013–16) and funded by the German Research Foundation, examined not only the jubilee celebrations but also regular performances of national days in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. In its second phase (2016–19), the project – now called 'Performing the nation and subnational differences in African national-day celebrations' – broadened its focus and also looked at other categories of belonging such as profession, age, and gender. It studied how these categories interacted with ethnicity, regional affinity, and religion, and how they were treated – highlighted or de-emphasised – in national-day celebrations. The project showed how visual representations and performances of the nation invoked and then subordinated differences such as ethno-regional belonging, profession, age, and gender, and how this subordination staged membership in the nation-state as the overarching and primary affiliation of its citizens (Gabriel, Lentz and N'Guessan 2018).

Taken together, these projects on African independence jubilees and ordinary national-day celebrations constitute the first comparative contribution to research into African national days, which have so far received little scholarly attention. There is a well-established

**Figure 5:** Military parade, which also comprises some delegations of school children, held for the 60th anniversary of independence in Ghana, Accra, 2017, © Carola Lentz.

field of studies of national days, but most research concentrates on Europe and the United States, complemented by some studies on Australia and New Zealand (McAllister 2012; Spillman 1998), India (Roy 2007), and the Middle East (Podeh 2011). African national days, in contrast, have been all but ignored, in spite of the suggestion of the French political scientist Yves-André Fauré (1978) that they were worth studying. The publications produced in the context of the above-mentioned research projects, including several monographs (Haberecht 2017; Lentz and Lowe 2018; Tiewa 2016), one anthology (Lentz and Kornes 2011) and several PhD theses as well as many journal articles and unpublished MA theses and field reports, have significantly helped to fill this gap (for a list of publications and unpublished materials, see https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmen-tal-archives/online-archive-african-independence-days/).

In addition to these publications, the projects both produced and collected a vast amount of material that is now stored in the online and physical archive on African Independence Days. During their fieldtrips, all researchers took countless photographs (and some videos) that captured the festive programme such as the parades, decoration ceremonies, and many more; they also documented many other activities in the context of the celebrations such as historical exhibitions or free concerts, and also more intimate forms of celebrating the national day in family gatherings and the like. In addition, the researchers collected secondary material such as newspaper articles reporting or commenting on the festivities as well as documents such as posters and leaflets, and objects such as paraphernalia featuring the festivities logo. In view of this immense material, Lentz decided to set up the Online Archive African Independence Days. Its creation was a colossal task, accomplished with the help of a number of student assistants under the supervision of Marie-Christin Gabriel. Future users are offered a storehouse of rich sources that can be mined for studies of national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa and, more generally, of processes and practices of nation-building and state-making.

**Figure 6:** Cultural performance presented before the parade on Ghana's 60th anniversary of independence, Accra, 2017, © Marie-Christin Gabriel.

## THE ARCHIVAL MATERIAL AND SOME OF THE STORIES IT TELLS

The Online Archive African Independence Days holds more than 28,000 images comprising photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects from twelve African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. It primarily consists of an online photo archive (https://bildarchiv.uni-mainz.de/AUJ/; https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmental-archives/online-archive-african-independence-days/). Some material is also stored at the physical archive on African Independence Days at ifeas (Figure 2) as well as in the department's ethnographic collection (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/ethnographic-collection/). Most of the material concerns recent celebrations but it has been complemented by some documentation of earlier festivities. In what follows, we present an overview of the material stored in the archive which is sorted into the above mentioned four categories: photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects, and we tell some of the stories that the material conveys. We put a particular focus on the photographs which constitute the main body of the archive's holdings.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

The Online Archive African Independence Days includes more than 23,000 photos taken at various events during the festive programmes of the national days in the countries under study (parades, decoration ceremonies, torchlight processions, etc.) as well as further events associated with the celebrations (theatre productions, concerts, conferences, etc.) and important public activities and ceremonies not directly related to Independence Day but organised during the relevant period (such as election campaigns or other public holidays).

**Figure 7:** Pupils cheering the military parade held at a stadium in Antananarivo for Madagascar's 50th anniversary of independence, Antananarivo, 2010, © Mareike Späth.

In order to convey an impression of these photographs and their richness for studies on national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa, we present some images of selected activities, namely parades (see Figures 3–8) and decoration ceremonies that nearly all African national-day celebrations feature.

Parades that constitute a common element of African national-day celebrations are a rich source for studying images of the nation. Parades perform national belonging in a very particular way, namely through carefully choreographed marching of individual bodies that are prepared to embody the nation (Gabriel, Lentz and N'Guessan 2018). Each country has its specific parade traditions which may, however, change over the course of the years. In Ghana, for instance, the early Independence Day parades comprised military units and school children as well as delegations of civilians such as market women. In the 1960s, military parades were held on the newly introduced Republic Day while the march-past by school children on Independence Day was retained. In 2001, after the first change of government under the new democratic regime, the military and uniformed services such as police, customs, or immigration services were brought back into the national-day parade, in addition to the school children whose participation continued. In Burkina Faso, in contrast, the parade is for the most part composed of civilians who are trained by the Burkinabè Army to march in lockstep (Gabriel, Lentz and N'Guessan 2018). Among them are units that represent vocational fields as well as delegations representing the country's regions; the latter are composed of men and women dressed in traditional clothes associated with distinct ethnic groups (Figure 3), but who march under the banners of the territorial-administrative units of the state such as 'Northern Region', 'Central Region', etc.

As the Ghanaian and the Burkinabè cases illustrate, the study of parades can provide revealing insights into how the nation is staged and how ethnic diversity is presented – an issue that the organisers of African national-day celebrations have to take into account one way or

**Figure 8:** Samba dancers taking part in the carnival parade held during the 50th anniversary of independence in Gabon, Libreville, 2010, © Christine Fricke.

another. In the Burkinabè case, where the ethnically-branded delegations march under the banners of the territorial-administrative units of the state, ethnic diversity is proudly portrayed as a constitutive element of the nation, but is at the same time 'domesticated' (Lentz 2017: 130) by subordinating it under the administrative-territorial division of the state. In contrast, the Ghanaian parade is free of any ethnic connotations. Instead, the Ghanaian national-day ceremony mainly evokes ethnicity through dances presented before the parade by school children or, on special occasions such as the sixtieth independence anniversary, by cultural troupes (see Figure 6). This format is another strategy of both showcasing and 'domesticating' ethnic diversity: ethnicity is downgraded by presenting it as a supporting programme to the principal state act; it is presented alongside territorial-administrative classification and thus as dependent parts of the nation-state; and it is defused and depoliticised through folklorisation, with dancers in traditional clothes presenting the nation as a colourful mosaic composed of distinct yet equal entities (Lentz 2017).

Another common element of national-day festivities are decoration ceremonies. In Burkina Faso, a national decoration ceremony held in the gardens of the presidential palace is a standard element of the national day celebrated on December 11, for which the presentation of the national flag by the national guard is an absolute prerequisite (Figure 9). During the ceremony, held in the presence of the president on the eve of Independence Day, several hundred Burkinabè are awarded every year for their services 'rendered to the nation', mainly efforts made within their occupational field. The national award ceremony (Figure 10) thus emphasises profession and relegates other sub-national differences and categories of belonging to the background; it presents a 'nation of workers', a standard trope of Burkinabè nationalist discourse (Haberecht 2017: 55–86). The decoration ceremonies therefore aim at uniting an ethnically and religious diverse population. However, the question of who is an exemplary member of the nation is contingent, as became particularly evident in 2014 when the interim government that was formed after the overthrow of

**Figure 9:** The national guard presenting the national flag during the decoration ceremony organised during the 53rd anniversary of Burkina Faso's independence, Ouagadougou, 2013, © Marie-Christin Gabriel.

President Blaise Compaoré had to revise the list of the designated recipients (Gabriel forthcoming). More generally, decorations not only honour the citizens but also stage the state and strengthen its legitimacy; by accepting the award, the citizens affirm the state's legitimacy and strengthen its claim as the superior organising authority.

So far, we have presented some photos of the main ceremonies that take place under the auspices of the president. However, the archive also holds photos that document some celebrations held in the regions and districts – particularly for Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire – which take place under the auspices of the regional/district state representatives. The regional or local replications of the main celebrations' principal festive elements, such as the salute to the national flag and the parade (see Figure 11), help to produce, and showcase, the nation-state's territory (N'Guessan, Lentz and Gabriel 2017). Again, strategies of staging the national/state territory vary from country to country. In Ghana, for instance, there are several dozen celebrations held simultaneously in the country's regions and districts whereas in Burkina Faso, the national/state territory is mainly evoked through the rotation of the main celebrations; since 2007, the so-called *fête tournante* rotates the main celebration, marked by the presence of the president, among the country's thirteen regions (in addition to regional celebrations held in the other regions). Both the rotation of the main celebrations as well as their replication throughout the country carry the nation into the regions, integrate the latter into the nation-state and turn participants and spectators from locals into national compatriots.

## NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Besides the photographs, the Online Archive African Independence Days stores photos and original paper copies of more than 11,500 newspaper articles on the celebrations. About

**Figure 10:** Decoration of Burkinabè during the national-day celebrations of 2013, Ouagadougou, 2013, © Marie-Christin Gabriel.



**Figure 11:** Women's delegation taking part in the parade held on Independence Day, Bongouanou, Côte d'Ivoire, 2013, © Konstanze N'Guessan.
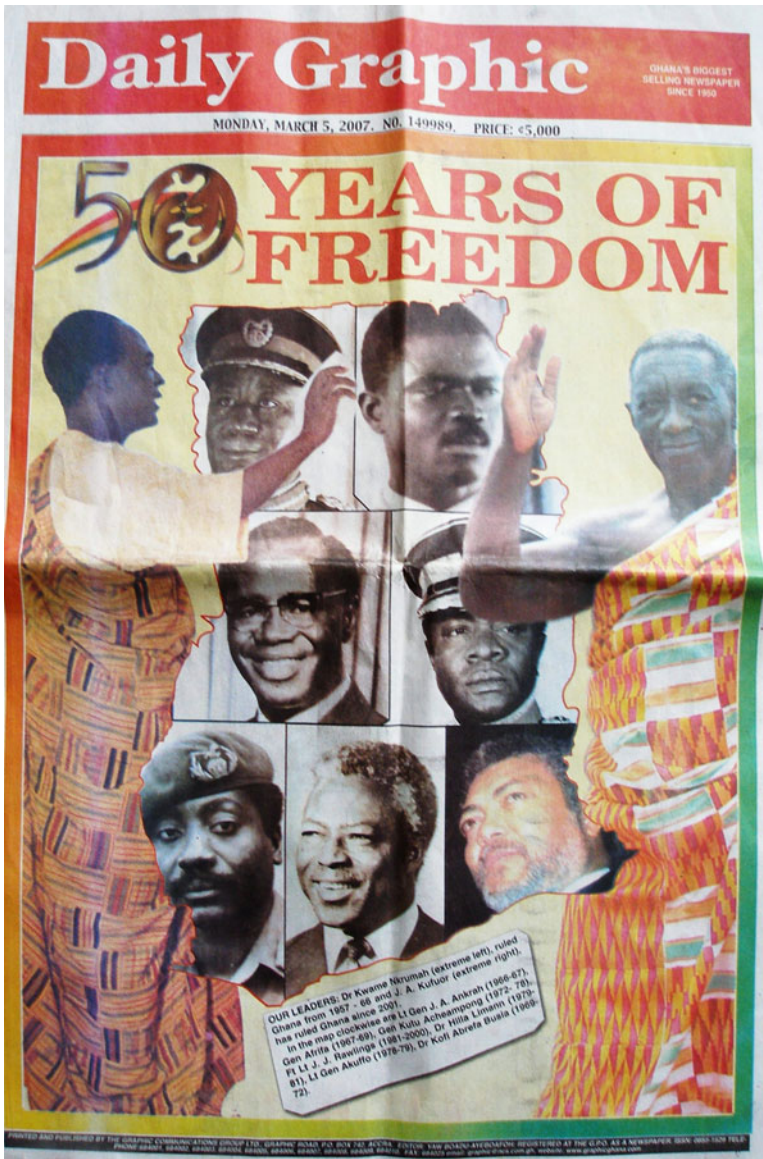
**Figure 12:** Title page of the *Daily Graphic* picturing Kwame Nkrumah and President Kufuor, standing left and right of the Ghana@50 logo, 5 March 2007, © Carola Lentz.

4,500 photographed articles from daily or weekly newspapers can be consulted online. In addition, nearly 7,000 newspaper articles collected from 150 newspapers (predominantly in English and French, but also in Afrikaans, German, Malagasy, and Swahili) are stored in the physical archive on African Independence Days at ifeas. Altogether, the newspaper articles offer a detailed documentation of the festivities and provide a particularly rich source for analysing the media coverage of the celebrations and some of the principal topics and debates emerging during the festivities.

**Figure 13:** Invitation card for the parade held on the occasion of the 57th anniversary of independence in Burkina Faso, 2017, © Marie-Christin Gabriel.

The Ghana@50 celebrations, for instance, provoked numerous debates which were continued and reported on in the national newspapers. There were debates on the level of political inclusiveness of the festivities, the elite-centrism of the festivities, issues of corruption, and the question of who should be commemorated as the 'true' father(s) of independence (see also Lentz 2013c; Lentz and Lowe 2018). The irony was that the Kufuor government organising the jubilee saw itself as standing in the tradition of what was once the opposition to Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister and president. Independence, however, could not be celebrated without reference to Nkrumah. The jubilee organisers launched the year-long Ghana@50 celebrations precisely on 21 September 2006, Nkrumah's birthday, which was certainly an attempt to avoid criticisms that Nkrumah was not duly commemorated. Furthermore, large billboards erected across the country and repeated newspaper advertisements showed Kwame Nkrumah and President Kufuor, standing left and right of the Ghana@50 logo and the 'Championing African Excellence' slogan. Both were clad in *kente* cloth (see Figure 12), quoting Akan royal traditions, and

**Figure 14:** Advertisements promoting the festivities for the 50th anniversary of independence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2010, © Vanessa Petzold.

extended their right hands towards each other, as if they would greet each other across time and space. However, quite a few Ghanaians sharply criticised this iconographic intimation that Nkrumah would endorse Kufuor's government. The Independence Day front page of *The Democrat*, for instance, a private newspaper close to the opposition, reminded its readers

**Figure 15:** Cloth produced for Côte d'Ivoire's 50th anniversary of independence, 2010, © Konstanze N'Guessan.

to 'remember how Kufuor and his political tradition . . . fought against independence', and in another article complained that Kufuor's party 'did not see anything good in Kwame Nkrumah, but now they are robbing the CPP [Nkrumah's party] of this magnificent glory of the 50th year anniversary' (*The Democrat*, 6 March 2007, No. 57).

## DOCUMENTS

In addition to newspaper articles, the archive also holds photos of over 1,000 documents that comprise posters, flyers, booklets (or excerpts of books), and brochures as well as minutes of organisational meetings, mostly produced by the organisers of the festivities. Invitation cards (see Figure 13), for instance, are documents that organise the audience attending the ceremony by assigning the invitees to certain sections where they should sit, and providing detailed information on when to arrive and in which attire to dress. At another level, these cards can be read as instruments that stage, and thus (re)produce, social, political and administrative differences and so create orderly images of the nation and the state (Gabriel, Lentz and N'Guessan 2016). The question of who is invited to take part in the ceremony (and who is not) and which place he or she is assigned (near the president or on a more remote stand) is a sensitive issue that may provoke frustration and conflict. Differences in status and rank are also produced through the hierarchical arrangement of stands and seats as well as the order of arrival, reserving the later arrival times for more highly ranking persons. However, although the organisers take great care in preparing the arrival and seating order, the implementation of their script relies heavily on the compliance of the invited guests. In fact, the invited guests sometimes alter the rank attributed to them, by, for instance, coming later or organising an ostentatious arrival with an entourage (a strategy that the traditional chiefs in Ghana employed, for instance, during the Ghana@50 celebrations).

The documents stored in the archive also constitute a rich source for investigating how the sense of nation is produced through pictorial and discursive means. It is, for instance, a

**Figure 16, 17:** Base cap and tie produced for Nigeria's 50th anniversary of independence celebrated in 2010, © Helen Okafor.

**Figure 18, 19:** Party hats and lanterns produced for the 50th anniversary of independence in Madagascar, © Helen Okafor.

**Figure 20:** Homepage of the Online Archive African Independence Days.

common technique to place national-day celebrations under a motto (that varies every year) – a strategy that creates variety in otherwise largely standardised rituals and helps to maintain the public's interest, but also channels the official discourses on the nation and the state (see also Gabriel forthcoming). The official discourses of the fiftieth anniversary of independence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, focused on the motto 'The DRC resolutely facing the future' (Petzold 2014: 93; our translation); the dominant images drew on symbols devoid of ethnic associations, but showed instead drawings of (anonymous) persons with whom all citizens could identify (Petzold 2014: 88–101) (see Figure 14).

## OBJECTS

Last but not least, the Online Archive African Independence Days contains photos of over 150 objects which are preserved in the department's ethnographic collection. They include paraphernalia featuring the anniversary logo and merchandise such as cups, base caps, pencils, hats, and jubilee cloth (see Figures 15–17).

In all the countries under study, the national-day celebrations – and the jubilees in particular – encourage the production of a broad range of paraphernalia and merchandise products such as pencils, cloth, hats, and t-shirts. Obviously, then, the national-day organisers draw on common event management strategies and the concept of the nation-state is condensed in consumer goods (see also Gabriel forthcoming).

| NEWSPAPER ARTICLES Benin | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Author and Title** | **Published in** | **Call Number Newspaper Archive** | **Call Number Online Archive** |
| **1970** | | | | |
| 03.08.1970 | L'E.N.E.P.: Dixieme anniversaire... | *Daho Express* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357963 |
| 03.08.1970 | L'E.N.E.P.: Dixieme anniversaire de notre independance nationale | *Daho Express* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357964 |
| 03.08.1970 | L'E.N.E.P.: Images de la foire de cotonou et do 1° aout | *Daho Express* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357965 |
| 04.08.1970 | L'E.N.E.P.: Messages au chef de l'Etat | *Daho Express* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357966 |
| 04.08.1970 | L'E.N.E.P.: Réaliser l'union nationale | *Daho Express* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357967 |
| **1980** | | | | |
| 30.11.1980 | Unknown: La societe nouvelle | *Ehuzu* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357973 |
| 01.12.1980 | Unknown: Message du président Mathieu KEREKOU | *Ehuzu* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357968 |
| 01.12.1980 | Unknown: Celebration de la fête nationale du 30 Novembre | *Ehuzu* | | Ethnologie_UMZ_UJ_0357969 |

**Figure 21:** Exemplary extract of the material lists providing an overview of the photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects collected in each country; the example shows an extract of the list indexing the newspaper articles collected for Benin.

In Madagascar, Mareike Späth and Céline Molter discovered that particularly popular national-day objects were party hats and lanterns (Figures 18 and 19). This points to an important aspect of the Malagasy Independence Day celebrations: they are not only a state act, but an occasion for the population to celebrate family parties and organise children's events. In other countries, too, national-day celebrations showcase both state-directed ceremonials of solemn character and popular cheerful activities such as concerts and festivals. The degree of citizen involvement in the festivities varies, however, depending on country-specific celebratory traditions. In Madagascar, popular enthusiasm for the national day celebrations seems to be distinctively high (see Späth 2013: 267–70, Späth and Molter 2011). On Independence Day, the Malagasy gather at home with family and friends, have a barbeque, share cakes, or make a trip to the countryside (Späth 2013: 267). A special event is a lantern procession for the children at night which, together with fireworks, marks the finale of Independence Day. That Independence Day is for many Malagasy first and foremost a family ritual was particularly important in 2010, when Andrej Rajoelina had taken power by a coup and the official celebration did not elicit much support or enthusiasm; but the local family celebrations went ahead as usual (Späth and Molter 2011).

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR USERS

There are many more stories that the objects and documents stored in the archive can tell. But how can potential users get an overview of the holdings and access the material? Before using the online search function, the user is invited to first visit the archive's homepage (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmental-archives/online-archive-afri-can-independence-days/; see Figure 20). Here, under Material Lists, users will find pdfs with detailed lists that describe the photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and objects gathered in the different countries (Figure 21). The user can click on the online search link (https://bildarchiv.uni-mainz.de/AUJ/; Figure 22), or consult a user's guide that provides

**Figure 22:** Search function of the Online Archive African Independence Days.

support if needed (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/files/2019/07/Rechercheanleitung.pdf). The three screenshots provided here give an impression of what to expect.

For further questions, users are invited to contact bildarchiv_unabhaengigkeitsfeiern@uni-mainz.de.

★★★

We very much hope that this rich archival material stimulates new questions and invites scholars to further engage in the study of national commemoration and political celebrations in Africa and, more generally, processes of nation-building and state-making. The research mentioned in this article has contributed to these fields, but, of course, many questions remain. Further research is needed, for instance, on how symbols and performances are employed to deal with ethno-regional and religious diversity. With which symbolic and performative means is the national/state territory produced vis-à-vis regional heterogeneity? How is national history commemorated in national-day celebrations, but also in other genres such as monuments, re-enactments etc.? Which cultural genealogies do national symbols evoke, and by whom and how are they contested? Of course, the archive offers only one possible source for future studies on these and further questions, and field research will always be necessary. Nonetheless, we are convinced that the material stored in the Online Archive African Independence Days offers a wealth of sources that can inspire researchers.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict. 2006 [1983]. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Askew, Kelly. 2002. *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Behrends, Andrea, Sung Joon Park and Richard Rottenburg (eds). 2014. *Travelling Models in African Conflict Resolution: Translating Technologies of Social Ordering*. Leiden: Brill.

Bierschenk, Thomas and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. 2014. 'Studying the dynamics of African bureaucracies: an introduction to states at work.' In: Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (eds), *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*. Leiden: Brill.

Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.

Elgenius, Gabriella. 2005. 'National days and nation building.' In: Linas Eriksonas and Leos Müller (eds), *Statehood Before and Beyond Ethnicity: Minor States in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1600–2000*. Brussels: Peter Lang.

Elgenius, Gabriella. 2011. *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fauré, Yves-André. 1978. 'Célébrations officielles et pouvoirs africains: symbolique et construction de l'État.' *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 12 (3): 383–404.

Gabriel, Marie-Christin, Carola Lentz and Konstanze N'Guessan. 2016. '"Jeder hat seinen Platz": Differenzpolitik und Raumordnungen in afrikanischen Nationalfeiern.' *Sociologus* 66 (2): 105–36.

Gabriel, Marie-Christin, Carola Lentz and Konstanze N'Guessan. 2018. 'Embodying the nation: the production of uniformity and difference in national-day parades.' *Ethnography*: < https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118816345 >

Gabriel, Marie-Christin. Forthcoming. 'The Making of the Nation/State: Organising National-day Celebrations in Burkina Faso.' PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Haberecht, Svenja. 2017. *Vom Reichtum eines armen Landes: Nationalfeiern und Nationenbildung in Burkina Faso* (Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung 40). Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.

Lentz, Carola. 2013a. 'Celebrating independence jubilees and the millennium: national days in Africa.' *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 208–16.

Lentz, Carola. 2013b. 'The 2010 independence jubilees: the politics and aesthetics of national commemoration in Africa.' *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 217–37.

Lentz, Carola. 2013c. 'Ghana@50: celebrating the nation, debating the nation.' *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 211: 519–46.

Lentz, Carola. 2017. 'Die Aufführung der Nation und die Einhegung von Ethnizität in afrikanischen Nationalfeiern.' In: Stefan Hirschauer (ed.): *Un/doing difference: Praktiken der Humandifferenzierung*. Weilerswist: Velbrück.

Lentz, Carola. 2019. 'Ereignis/Event/Veranstaltung: theoretische und methodische Herausforderungen für die Forschung.' In: Marie-Christin Gabriel, Christopher Hohl and Carola Lentz (eds). *Eventforschung: theoretische und methodische Herausforderungen*. Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz 183: 11–23.

Lentz, Carola and Heike Becker. 2013. 'The politics and aesthetics of commemoration: national days in southern Africa.' *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36 (1 and 2): 1–10.

Lentz, Carola and Jan Budniok. 2007. 'Ghana@50 – celebrating the nation: an account from Accra.' *Africa Spectrum* 42 (3): 531–41.

Lentz, Carola and Godwin Kornes (eds). 2011. *Staatsinszenierung, Erinnerungsmarathon und Volksfest. Afrika feiert 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Brandes and Apsel.

Lentz, Carola and David Lowe. 2018. *Remembering Independence*. London: Routledge.

McAllister, Patrick A. 2012. *National Days and the Politics of Indigenous and Local Identities in Australia and New Zealand*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

N'Guessan, Konstanze, Carola Lentz and Marie-Christin Gabriel. 2017. 'Performing the national territory: the geography of national-day celebrations.' *Nations and Nationalism* 23 (4): 686–706.

Petzold, Vanessa. 2014. '"Building a nation is also dreaming together": das Cinquantenaire der Demokratischen Republik Kongo.' Working papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 148. < http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/Dateien/AP148.pdf >.

Podeh, Elie. 2011. *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East*. Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Roy, Srirupa. 2007. *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Späth, Mareike. 2013. 'Madagascar's independence jubilee: a nation's holiday in times of crisis.' *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 257–75.

Späth, Mareike and Céline Molter. 2011. 'Musikspektakel und Familienfeiern: das Cinquantenaire in Madagaskar.' In: Carola Lentz and Godwin Kornes (eds): *Staatsinszenierung, Erinnerungsmarathon und Volksfest. Afrika feiert 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Brandes and Apsel.

Spillman, Lyn. 1998. 'When do collective memories last?' *Social Science and History*, 22 (4) (Special Issue Memory and the Nation): 445–77.

Tiewa, Kathrin. 2016. *The Lion and his Pride: The Politics of Commemoration in Cameroon* (Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, 38). Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2003. 'Calendars and history: a comparative study of the social organization of national memory.' In: Jeffrey Olick (ed.), *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts and Transformations in National Retrospection*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.