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# Perspectives on African Studies and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

Leo J. de Haan

**Abstract:** In this farewell lecture on the occasion of his departure as Professor of Development in sub-Saharan Africa at Leiden University and Director of the African Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden, the author starts with the *wuvuzela* issue as an illustration of the lack of confidence the world has in South Africa organizing and running the World Cup smoothly. He takes that as a sign that there still exists a stereotype of African incompetence, despite the social and economic progress Africa has witnessed in the last decade. He does not want to argue that African Studies have not been able to offset such a stereotype. What he tries to show is that it is not clear from the wealth of actor-oriented research in African Studies what the main social, political and economic trends in Africa are. He argues that actor-oriented research in African Studies should try to increase its relevance by contributing—through meta-analyses and comparative research—to the discussion on social, political and economic trends in Africa. Special attention should be paid to the possible rise of the developmental state in Africa. In doing so, African Studies may also substantiate its claim that it is able to challenge the universal pretensions of mainstream social science.

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The following text documents the farewell lecture on the occasion of the departure of Prof. Leo J. de Haan as Professor of Development in sub-Saharan Africa at Leiden University and Director of the African Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden, on Monday, April 12, 2010.

Meneer de Rector Magnificus,  
Members of the Board of Governors of the African Studies Centre,  
Dear Listeners,

This is a *vuuzela*. It is an instrument that is very popular these days among South African football supporters and is used to spur on their favourite team. There is fierce competition in South Africa among producers, who all make their own versions and cannot agree who is entitled to call their plastic horns *vuuzelas* or not.<sup>1</sup> Everything on this particular example would indicate that it was produced in South Africa, but maybe it was imported from China—who knows?

During the Confederations Cup last year—a kind of dress rehearsal for this summer’s World Cup—the rest of the world heard this instrument for the first time. A campaign immediately started to ban it during the World Cup as a stadium full of *vuuzelas* produces such an alarmingly high level of noise that it was felt that foreign teams might be intimidated. I have to admit that when watching a match during the Confederations Cup, I did wonder whether my TV’s sound system had broken. A stadium full of *vuuzelas* really does generate a lot of noise.

I do not intend to speak this afternoon about musical instruments from Africa nor about football. However, I think the *vuuzela* issue illustrates the lack of confidence the world has in South Africa organizing and running the World Cup smoothly. There has generally been little confidence about the stadiums and other infrastructure projects being completed on time. And others think South Africa is extremely dangerous for foreign football supporters and that national football teams should be heavily protected while there. In brief, there is little confidence that an African country could manage to organize such an event successfully. Yet, we are dealing here with the most well-organized country on the continent. Apparently, there still exists in the world a stereotype of African incompetence, despite the social and economic progress Africa has witnessed in the last decade.

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1 See E. van Gelder (2009: 53–55, 2010); I thank Maaïke Westra for drawing my attention to this story. Interestingly, advocates of the *vuuzela* have assumed a typical African authenticity and established links with all kinds of cultural traditions in which wind instruments made of animal horns play a role. However, one expert in African music dismissed the *vuuzela* as an “un-African” instrument.

Fifty years ago the image of Africa was completely different. Expectations were high then and there was a feeling of euphoria across much of Africa. Not everywhere though, because in April 1960 the ANC was banned in South Africa after the Sharpsville massacre a month earlier and in Algeria the so-called “Battle of Algiers” was still going on. In other countries, however, independence movements—broadly composed of political parties, farmers’ organizations, trade unions, traditional associations and churches—were winning a say in government. In some countries, this process of decolonization went smoothly and self-governance was introduced effortlessly. But in others it was preceded by many years of struggle involving strikes, boycotts, riots and even guerrilla warfare. No fewer than thirteen countries gained independence in 1960 and will celebrate fifty years of independence this year (or *cinquantenaire*, because many of these countries are franco-phone).

Independence movements had managed to unite all grievances and discontent—be it about civil rights, land grab, crop prices or licences—in the demand for independence. Independence became synonymous with social and economic progress and initially the promise of progress was rewarded. In the 1950s colonies had started a policy of investing in infrastructure, crop improvement, land conservation, education and health. Many new African states continued to follow this investment policy with great verve. Economic growth continued until the 1970s but then collapsed, and disappointment set in. Only since the end of the 1990s have some of the high expectations of fifty years ago begun to materialize. This afternoon, I would like to comment on the type of research in African studies about this issue. But first I would like to clarify which Africa I am talking about. In other words, where is Africa exactly and what is African Studies all about?

## Where is Africa?

In his inaugural lecture some years ago, my colleague Peter Pels<sup>2</sup> drew quotation marks in the air when he was talking about Africa to illustrate his dilemma. To me as a geographer, it is at first sight much simpler. Geographers, by the very nature of their discipline, are used to delimiting areas. In human geography it is acceptable to take a physical, geographic entity as point of departure for further examination in the knowledge that the interaction between physical environment and society is intense, and that many societal processes can be meaningfully delimited for further research with

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2 Professor in Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Africa South of the Sahara—in particular the modern period—at Leiden University.

the help of physical boundaries. That consideration invites Africa to be considered a continent with surrounding islands. Also in daily life this is not an unusual idea: The African Union unites all countries on the African continent; all countries are also members of the Economic Commission for Africa, a regional UN organization; and they borrow from the African Development Bank. They take part in the Association of African Universities (AAU) and their national football teams compete for the Africa Cup of Nations. In summary, the African continent is part of the world of states.

In other cases however, the idea of Africa is not limited to the continent. Pan-Africanism as it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century explicitly includes African diasporas, not in the least Afro-Americans in the US. On the other hand, my professorship at this university<sup>3</sup> renders Africa a bit smaller as it limits Africa to sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. all countries south of the Sahara. One might think that in this case the Sahara is being used as a physical, geographical boundary, leaving out North Africa. And indeed there are good historical, economic, cultural and political reasons to see North Africa as “Middle Eastern” or “Mediterranean” as Braudel (1949) did, rather than as part of Africa. But the crux of the matter is not why North Africa should be counted as part of something else but instead why sub-Saharan Africa should be dealt with separately. Appiah (1992) showed that underlying all political, cultural or economic arguments there is a predominantly historical-racial argument. This part of Africa was considered by European colonizers to be “populated by the Black race”. Obviously in this context Black was not a biological but ideological concept. Black was synonymous with “uncivilized” and “inferior” and the people there had to be “civilized” or, in other words, “colonized”. Black Africa—as “sub-Saharan Africa” is more a contemporary euphemism—is a colonial invention, a mythical justification for colonization. However, as frequently happens, myths become reality and eventually the identity formation of Africans, regardless of how different their traditional cultures are or were, was shaped according to Appiah by that myth and the continuous struggle against it. In that sense, delimitating Africa to sub-Saharan Africa has become reality<sup>4</sup> and also the area of research for the African Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden, and the field of African Studies.

This delimitation is, of course, relative. After all, sub-Saharan Africa is an integral part of a globalizing world, with all the influences from elsewhere that impact it and the forces from the region itself that have an impact else-

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3 My chair is in “Development in sub-Sahara Africa” at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, the Faculty of Social Sciences, Leiden University.

4 Thus including recognition of its racist roots (Appiah 1992: 38–41, 289).

where. Raw materials from sub-Saharan Africa are of strategic importance to the global superpowers, intra-African migration is bringing sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa closer together, and African diasporas in other parts of the world are exerting an influence elsewhere. Sometimes the ASC is inclined to put a fence around its area of studies, but it is also aware that, depending on the issue, another cross-section of the world like “all countries around the Indian Ocean” or “all Islamic countries” can at times be more appropriate.<sup>5</sup>

## What is African Studies?

The explanation above regarding the area of studies leads us to another interesting question, about what the study of sub-Saharan Africa—usually called African Studies—should contain.

The roots of this field of study are unmistakably in the colonial period, very specifically so in some of the larger European countries, for economic and political reasons and later for religious reasons too. They increasingly colluded in an all-encompassing civilization mission where it was necessary to know and understand Africa better. Only when the Netherlands lost the Dutch East Indies did it also become interested in Africa. It was therefore in 1947 that the Africa Institute, one of the predecessors of the ASC, was founded in Rotterdam (de Bok 2000: 11).

These were turbulent times in African Studies. The independence movement was striving for both political freedom and also for intellectual freedom and was starting to criticize the colonial roots of this field of studies, which meant—and sometimes still does—that Europeans and other non-Africans were “denied” the right to produce knowledge about Africa (Melber 2009). Admittedly, the risk of what Said (2003) called “Orientalism”—the aggregate of erroneous assumptions about non-Western cultures motivated by Western prejudices—was and is valid for African Studies too. But the idea that only Africans who live in Africa can write with authority about Africa is mistaken.<sup>6</sup> African Studies is a motley of scientists of diverging identities who write about Africa: men and women, black and white, from Africa and not from Africa or from Africa but living in the US, British and French with a colonial past or Dutch without a colonial past in Africa (at least in the eyes of those who do not know history), and neo-liberal and neo-Marxist, etc. (see also Melber 2005).

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5 For this reason, the Library, Documentation and Information Department at the ASC also has an interesting collection on North Africa.

6 Melber 2005: 372 refers among others to Mbembe (1999: 3).

In this motley, the ASC has established its own place. The Centre feels it is playing a leading role in Europe and Africa with pioneering research in and about African societies with a focus on social-cultural, economic and political processes. These processes are not only analysed in their mutual relationships but also in connection with other societal phenomena elsewhere in the world. Research at the Centre is multidisciplinary, not just because societal realities are complex but also because the understanding of a particular region requires a combination of perspectives. This means that a whole range of social disciplines are represented at the ASC, and that through multidisciplinary there is added value.<sup>7</sup> Additional complementarity is being obtained through external programmes of collaboration. A strong emphasis on empirical research in Africa in collaboration with African researchers is an important hallmark of the ASC without neglecting other sources of information inside and outside Africa.

On the basis of research done at the Centre or in African Studies at large, it should not be too difficult to explain why only recently it looks as if at least some of Africa's high expectations of fifty years ago are going to be met. However, that question is more difficult to answer and to make that clear I will comment on: (1) actor-oriented research on the livelihoods of the poorest in sub-Saharan Africa and (2) research on the role of the state.

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7 Multidisciplinary collaboration requires a sense of critical reflection from the researchers involved on their own disciplinary methodology and an openness and interest with respect to the disciplinary methodologies of their fellow researchers. Multidisciplinary research strives to integrate various methodologies and can sometimes benefit from “fuzzy” forms of conceptualization and modelling. Chabal and Daloz (2006: 322) call for an eclectic approach including an awareness of the limited validity of disciplinary concepts and theories. There is not only one suitable methodology for researching particular phenomena.

N.B. This is completely different from the “theoretical or conceptual pot-pourri” for which Chabal (op. cit.: 473) criticizes African Studies. There he points to the danger that students of African Studies are confronted with a diverse range of subjects without having the proper methodological training to be able to perform scholarly work. I agree that programmes in African Studies face this risk: They often have students who do not yet have sufficient methodological training in their original discipline and subsequently introduce them in a sketchy way and with a view to interdisciplinarity to themes and accompanying methodologies from other disciplines without probing into their original or another disciplinary methodological training. According to Chabal, this results in “*identity specialists* with little serious training debat[ing] points of political correctness”.

## Actor-Oriented Research, Livelihoods and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa

World poverty has decreased over the last few decades. The number of people living on less than 1 USD a day (and because of the rising cost of living in developing countries the current rate is set at 1.25 USD a day) dropped between 1980 and 2005 by half a billion to 1.4 billion. However in sub-Saharan Africa the situation has not improved: In 1981 half the population lived on less than 1 USD a day and in 2005 this was still the case. The 1996 figure was the worst with 58 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa living on less than 1 USD a day. In absolute numbers, the figure even increased from 200 million to 380 million between 1981 and 2005 (Chen and Ravallion 2008: 27; World Bank 2009: 47–48).

Since 1960, there has only been one reliable statistical indicator available to measure an increase in standard of living, namely GDP per capita figures. Between 1960 and 2006, GDP per capita hardly improved in sub-Saharan Africa although, interestingly, the region did show economic growth way into the 1970s. However in the 1980s and 1990s there was a disastrous decline in growth and it was not until the late 1990s that recovery finally started (Ghosh 2008; World Bank 2005: 277).

The use of poverty indicators, which are indicators of economic growth or income, can admittedly be criticized. As I have argued elsewhere, the quality of human life or “the good life” as it is often made operational in livelihood research, is much more than material welfare. Poverty is multidimensional: It involves access to resources and influencing opportunities, and only a holistic approach will result in a proper understanding of poverty in specific contexts (de Haan and Zoomers 2005).

The Chronic Poverty Research Centre in Manchester has attempted to establish a poverty indicator that would both comply with these insights and be able to highlight the poverty situation in Africa retrospectively.<sup>8</sup> However this picture does not differ very much from the one just sketched. Of all sub-Saharan African countries, just Mauritius saw a consistent drop in poverty rates between 1970 and 2003.<sup>9</sup> In all other sub-Saharan African countries poverty only improved in one or two aspects regarding chronic poverty, or not at all. Another indicator that to a certain extent tries to do justice to the critique of poverty researchers mentioned above, namely the Human Development Index, is only available since 1990. It confirms the impression

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8 The Chronic Poverty Index is composed of four indicators: “relatively low GDP per capita and relatively high mortality, fertility and undernourishment” (Chronic Poverty Research Centre 2008: 14).

9 Op. cit.: 15.



that only since the late 1990s has the poverty situation in sub-Saharan Africa improved, though no more rapidly so than in the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, this long-term trend in the standard of living after independence, followed by straightforward deterioration and a recent rebound is not reflected very clearly in actor-oriented research, which is so important at the ASC, and in African Studies in general. Actor-oriented research is a type of research that tries to describe and explain the concrete actions of actors, mostly individuals, households or families but sometimes also larger units. The problem statement with respect to these actions can be of a socio-cultural, socio-economic, political or even ecological nature. From this actor-oriented research, a much-diffused picture emerges of the trend in standards of living in sub-Saharan Africa for various reasons which will be discussed below.

In the first place, and contrary to what might be expected, poor and even deteriorating living conditions do not always play a role in the problem statement or even the contextualization of actor-oriented research. My impression is that it *is* the case in politically oriented research questions because issues like “claim-making” and “voice” have been directly linked to living conditions. But in socio-culturally inspired research questions—even those on identity and ethnicity—living conditions play a less prominent role, much to my regret. This is all the more striking since it is the other way around in poverty research, which expressly includes political and socio-cultural factors in the analysis.

But what is more important is the second reason, i.e. the so-called “micro-macro paradox”. The above-mentioned trends in standards of living in Africa are average figures and an enormous variety of concrete situations may be hidden behind average trends, which tend to emerge in actor-oriented research.

Kanbur (2001) argued that it is quite possible that poverty is decreasing on a national scale, while the living conditions of important groups in the population are worsening. This is in fact a methodological problem of aggregation. He also feels it is possible that improvements in living conditions in the long term may be determined or could be expected—for example after economic reforms—while the immediate effect on everyday reality might be unemployment, rising prices, lower food consumption and a drop

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10 The Human Development Index (HDI) has been used since 1990 and is composed of three indicators representing the basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living. The HDI's minimum value is 0 and its maximum value is 1. The HDI for the whole of sub-Sahara Africa rose from 0.464 in 1998 to 0.514 in 2007, while worldwide HDI rose from 0.712 in 1998 to 0.753 in 2007 (UNDP 2009: 174; UNDP 2000: 160).

in school enrolment figures. This is in fact a methodological problem of time horizon (caused by a difference in time horizon). Macro-economic studies have established that recent economic growth in Africa has resulted in a decrease in poverty but there are indications that this improvement has not extended to peripheral regions and areas with a high variability in precipitation, to groups with little education and little access to land (women in particular) and to groups with increased health risks (Christiaensen, Demery and Paternostro 2003). Therefore, Kanbur—once a World Bank Chief Economist—has called on macro economists, financial specialists and policy-makers at international financial institutions to take the arguments of development specialists, social scientists and advocacy workers seriously and to attempt conciliation.<sup>11</sup> However in my view, the debate on macro trends and micro experience will be unending if the perspectives at the level of aggregation and on the time horizon do not get closer. Also actor-oriented research needs to carefully think about this and to work on a solution. In the following I will explain how.

Thirdly, there is a school of actor-oriented research in Africa in which actors' poor living conditions play a central role, namely livelihood research (de Haan 2007; de Haan and Zoomers 2006), and my personal research is part of this school. But this type of research can also be criticized. Livelihood research departs from the capacities and abilities of actors and analyses the way they organize their livelihoods on the basis of available material and non-material resources. And the way they obtain these resources or provide themselves access to these resources and the results of that in terms of quality of existence is part of the analysis.<sup>12</sup> In livelihood research, an increased awareness has developed that the quality of life means much more than material welfare in terms of income, yield or even health. A holistic approach to livelihoods is necessary in which a wealth of dimensions—cultural, social, economic and political—are included in the analysis for a better understanding of the complexity of livelihoods. As a result, livelihood research is digging deeper to gain analytical quality. However, attention for this multidimensionality of livelihoods and the necessity of a holistic analysis

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11 Kanbur 2001: 1093; I thank Marion Eeckhout for drawing my attention to this paper.

12 In livelihood research there are different emphases too. Attention to the location of the resources used has resulted in new insights about mobility, migration and urban-rural complementarities. Attention to issues of sustainability has resulted in an improved understanding of the extremely complex ecology of Africa. And attention to the vulnerability of livelihoods caused by ecological and climatological variability has proved conceptually too restricted in view of the vulnerabilities to war and HIV/AIDS. By taking these into consideration, vulnerability has become a mature concept.

also brings distortions. Firstly, with the progression of insights into the complexity of livelihoods, an unconcealed admiration has developed for the endurance and creativity of actors and their ability to combine diverging and often widely dispersed resources and activities into a livelihood. Many livelihoods are without doubt harsh and tough but actors find a certain satisfaction in them and attain self-realization. Even in cases of survival at a very basic level of existence, the determination of the pro-active actor catches the eye of the reader as if the researcher wants to demonstrate that surviving is an art. A rosy picture is implicitly being sketched.

Secondly—and returning to the micro-macro paradox—because of the desire to scrutinize the complexity of livelihoods, the scale of research remains limited. In general, we are dealing with case studies that only cover one or two localities. It is often said that livelihoods are globalizing, i.e. are part and parcel of the process of globalization, but they are usually not researched beyond their locality.

In summary, actor-oriented research is unfortunately often too optimistic and too micro.

My fourth comment on actor-oriented research in African Studies is the lack of historical depth, or perhaps this is better phrased as a lack of full exploration of the historical dimension because actor-oriented research is historicizing, i.e. an analysis of the historical roots of a contemporary situation, does receive attention. That is all right but I plead for more than that. Particularly the development of livelihoods—i.e. the composition, backgrounds and results over a certain period—needs to be mapped. Consequently, I am appealing for more longitudinal actor-oriented studies.

A final comment on actor-oriented research, which partly follows from the comments mentioned above, is what Chabal (2005) called the “excessive specialization” in African Studies when pointing at the rigid focus on specific ethnic groups and countries where self-referencing groups of scientists tend to coagulate. According to Chabal, these groups leave without achieving any scientific progress because they have given the uniqueness of their case an unassailable status. This results in a “tautology of exceptionalism” because the only explanation for the observed social behaviour is that actors behave as they do “because of who they are” (Chabal 2005: 474). Apparently Chabal was aiming his critique first and foremost at his mother country, where specialization has at times turned into university infighting between research groups specializing in a particular ethnicity. However, he does point to a real danger, and African Studies should continuously ensure that scientific progress and relevance are not fostered by staying in closed circles.

These comments explain why a clear picture about the development of long-term trends in standards of living does not emerge from actor-oriented

research in African Studies. On the one hand, it is logical because an enormous differentiation in living conditions is hidden in averages over the long-term so the picture can only be diffuse. However, on the other hand there is also the challenge of coming to grips with that same endless variation in living conditions. Attempts should be made to deduce conclusions from actor-oriented research that surpass the micro level and by doing so enter the debate about macro trends in standards of living. This roughly applies to other themes, too, such as environmental degradation and climate change, ethnicity and conflict, and mobility and migration. Consequently, I call for two supplementary research strategies: meta-analysis and comparative research.

Meta-analyses are studies that compare existing case studies and try to synthesize them, using a systematic analytical framework. Such studies bring together primary data from underlying studies in order to determine if and where broader generalizations can be made than would have been possible on the basis of individual case studies (McCormick, Rodney and Varcoe 2003).

Meta-analyses put stringent requirements on the methodological quality of underlying studies because their methodological account must be clear and replicable to allow for new analysis and possibly new interpretation. Therefore meta-analysis is research of previous research and not just a synthesis of previous findings. And qualitative meta-analysis is not just a synthesis of conclusions and insights from previous research, although it is sometimes called meta-synthesis (Boeije 2010: 154; Thyer 2010: 654). Qualitative meta-analysis has to penetrate the theoretical and methodological points of departure of underlying studies because all the findings and conclusions depend on them and all analysis would otherwise be built on quicksand.

Qualitative meta-analysis of actor-oriented research is still little known but is an interesting methodology for African Studies to explore and develop (see Reveney 2005; Glasmeier and Farrigan 2005). It does not only offer a fruitful counterweight against excessive specialization but also opens up opportunities for debate from a micro perspective about macro trends in poverty and development in Africa.

Meta-analysis is supplementary to the other research strategy I propose, more comparative research. Comparative research does not necessarily have to aim for broad generalizations for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa because research comparing different parts of Africa can also be interesting. However, comparative research *does* mean research that systematically traces similarities and differences on the basis of a comparative explanatory framework, or that tries to challenge existing theories with comparative

empirical data. After all, there are only two scientific justifications for the existence of a social science research centre specifically oriented towards Africa. The first is that Africa is something special and different from the rest of the world, and therefore should be taken separately and needs its own formulation of theories. The ASC dissociates itself from such a view, as will have become clear from my earlier arguments.<sup>13</sup> The other justification that we support at the ASC is that what is being presented in the mainstream of social sciences as universal models or theories of societal processes are in fact Western or North Atlantic particularities. Therefore, mainstream social sciences must be challenged on their universal pretensions by empirical material from other parts of the world, and not just from Africa but also from Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and/or Latin America.<sup>14</sup> It even means that the Asian model for economic growth, which is now catching on in development theory after the bankruptcy of models inspired by Europe and North America, must be challenged for its part. To my great satisfaction, the ASC and the Royal Netherlands Institute of South East Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden have already accepted this challenge of comparative research. Our joint programme entitled “Tracking Development” is examining and comparing historical development pathways of a number of African and South East Asian countries. I sincerely hope that much more comparative research both within the ASC and in collaboration with external research groups will follow.

Kanbur (2001: 1090) also mentioned another difference of opinion, namely the salutary effects of liberalized markets. Theoretically they are free and lead to an efficient allocation of scarce resources but in practice there are clear differences in power between market parties and, consequently, markets are not particularly free. Initially, power relations and differences in power remained underexposed in actor-oriented research on livelihoods. The presentation of pro-active actors at the micro-level organizing their livelihoods introduced an unproblematic presentation with respect to power relations,<sup>15</sup> with the emphasis on the creative way in which actors were busy with their resources and capitals. As a result, power relations as a mecha-

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13 This would be the “Exotic Africa” of tourist brochures. See also p. 99 about Orientalism. By the way, neither would the other extreme, namely that Africa is nothing special, justify the existence of a separate research centre as the ASC.

14 See Bates, Mudimbe and O’Barr (1993). The editors’ intentions here have been explicitly to demonstrate that African Studies contributes to scientific progress in the various disciplines. Of course, it can also be considered a call for African Studies to have a permanent status at American universities.

15 See de Haan and Zoomers (2005). Looking back at more than ten years of livelihood research, Clark and Carney (2008) argue that power relations have often remained underexposed.

nism that brings about inequality and social exclusion were neglected. I feel that this problem has now been overcome and power relations are receiving ample attention in livelihood research. But there should not only be a focus on local power relations but also on the relationship between local impeding structures and supra-local structures—in other words, the functioning of supra-local institutions.<sup>16</sup> It is particularly in this field that an important link must be established between national and regional government policies and the supposed neo-patrimonial character of the state in Africa and the need for the rise of the development state. After all, it is usually thought that the state has an important role to play in regulating power relations and removing bottlenecks to allow an emancipation of the poor.

## The State in Sub-Saharan Africa

The role of the state in development in sub-Saharan Africa is critically assessed from the deeply rooted idea that societies are “makeable”—at least to a certain degree—and that governments should devote themselves to this task. And since, as indicated above, little long-term improvement has been seen in standards of living, doubts have arisen about the effectiveness of the state and questions are being asked about the formation of the state in Africa.

African governments are considered by the outside world to be corrupt and the state is used by political elites to secure their own interests and those of the rank and file in their own ethnic group. Moreover, political power is not based on legal rules, elected representatives and accompanying accountability but instead on informal ethnic bonds or family ties and traditions of authoritarian rule. A state conceptualized in this manner is called neo-patrimonial and is a mixture or a result of the two extremes on a conceptual continuum running from patrimonial, where all political and administrative relations are personal relations, to legal-rational, where relations are formal and the public and the private are separate. In the neo-patrimonial state, public and private spheres *are* formally separated and accepted formal rules do exist but in practice they can easily be replaced by the personal and the informal. It is sometimes erroneously argued that one can talk about a formal façade with a factual, informal reality behind it. From this view, African states are bedecked with a constitution and all kinds of laws, with ministries, parliaments and even elections. But this only creates a make-believe world, a façade that the country needs in order to be able to play a role in the “world of states”, to be a member of the United Nations and to receive develop-

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16 This goes for all actor-oriented research in African Studies.

ment aid. However, façade is the wrong metaphor: Patrimonial and legal-rational elements function at the same time in the neo-patrimonial state and so both are reality.<sup>17</sup> This is also an important insight from the Internationale Samenwerking programme entitled “The State in Africa” that the ASC is running in collaboration with the Africa Directorate at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Why is this such an important discussion? Because it is claimed that once a state is more patrimonial and less legal-rational (i.e. more corrupt and practising favouritism), it is less able to develop the country, i.e. be a developmental state.<sup>18</sup> And that turns out to be wide of the empirical truth, as comparative research has made clear. The Tracking Development research programme mentioned earlier has shown that neo-patrimonial states can also be developmental states in that they can fulfil a central role in the process of capital accumulation (or primitive accumulation) for economic growth. The recent report by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR)<sup>19</sup> has paid much attention to this point but, contrary to what the report postulates, we are not dealing with a sliding scale, a continuum from neo-patrimonial to developmental state (WRR 2010: 75–76). Less neo-patrimony does not automatically mean more development. The question is instead when or why a neo-patrimonial state becomes a developmental state as well. The answer lies in pressure from society for more welfare and for the political-administrative elite to create economic growth because otherwise its dominant position is in danger. Therefore, and contrary to what is often thought, a neo-patrimonial state can be a developmental state at the same time.<sup>20</sup>

Adequate implementation capacity is seen by the WRR as an essential characteristic of a development state.<sup>21</sup> This is absolutely correct. It is not corruption, clientelism and patronage that need be seen as the problems of the neo-patrimonial state, but rather the unpredictability about when and where these patrimonial elements occur and when the formal-legal order

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17 See Erdmann and Engel (2007) for a clear overview of the debate.

18 And in the ultimate case, the state runs the risk of becoming a failed state, one that can no longer guarantee the security and livelihoods of its population.

19 WRR is the acronym for “Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid”.

20 See for a vital contribution to this point Chabal and Daloz (1999). In the discussion about the “AFRICA dummy” (the residual factor which after global cross-country regression analysis remains and explains the negative economic growth of countries in Africa) the neo-patrimonial state takes a prominent place. That state would favour redistribution and privilege current consumption over investment: see Englebert (2000). For a critique of the supposed chronic growth shortfall in Africa, see Jerven (2010). I thank André Leliveld for drawing my attention to these papers.

21 The report writes “being able to deliver”. WRR 2010: 83.

takes precedence. Of course, this uncertainty does not advance the implementation capacity but implementation capacity grows as it become more predictable when formal and informal rules are used. Recently some neo-patrimonial states in sub-Saharan Africa have been very successful in certain respects. According to Di John (2010), centralized forms of patronage and corruption are able to increase the stability and resilience of the state, for example through a central party system that subsequently knows how to hold on to regional elites through redistribution. He explicitly mentions Tanzania and Zambia, which cannot be considered as developmental states but which proved strong enough to withstand the economic crisis of the 1980s, or at least did not become failed states. According to Di John, South Africa, Botswana and Mauritius can all be considered developmental states and are indeed countries with a strong party organization and centralized patronage. However, a strong party organization and centralized patronage are no guarantee of a robust overall implementation capacity. For example, South Africa is better at effective taxation than at pursuing an industrialization policy, and Botswana is performing well with respect to democratic institutions but not in combating HIV/AIDS.<sup>22</sup>

So neo-patrimonial states do not have to democratize, liberalize and outlaw corruption before they can become developmental states.<sup>23</sup> But their political-administrative elites *do* have to feel a need—because of political pressure from society—to engage in a social contract for economic growth with their population instead of just engaging in a redistribution system of state revenues based on patronage and a fat bank account abroad.

However, I have to disappoint those of you who read in my words a straightforward plea to fully support so-called “civil society organizations” in

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22 R. Werbner (2002), *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana. The Public Anthropology of Kalanga Elites*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Werbner calls Botswana a good, but also exceptional, example of an African state with a strong implementation capacity in a relatively open society. He uses the case of Botswana to explicitly oppose J. Bayart (1993), *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman), who argues that the post-colonial state in Africa is characterized by co-optation of elites and personal networks of political entrepreneurs, and also J. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou (1999), *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey) who discuss the intertwining of the state in Africa and criminality.

23 This does not mean that democratization cannot be a way of putting pressure on the political-administrative elite. K. Weghorst and S. Lindberg (2009) in *The Role of Private and Collective Goods in Elections: Evidence from Ghana* (ODI Africa Power & Politics Working Paper 5) show that clientelism in Ghana and redistribution through patronage are costing more than ever but that during elections more and more voters are judging politicians on their performance with respect to development. I thank Martin van Vliet for having me reread this paper.



Africa.<sup>24</sup> Indeed at first sight, one would think that organizations focused on endorsing accountability, advocacy, claim-making and empowerment are *the* organizations to articulate political pressure from society. One could think here of a civil rights movement, a trade union, a women's organization or an anti-corruption NGO. However, the problem is that these kinds of organizations fit all too well into our model of political reform and their values come close to our values. But we also have to think outside the box and away from the blueprint. Just as representation and legitimacy in a political system do not necessarily have to run via political parties and parliamentary elections, it must also remain conceivable that endorsing accountability, advocacy and claim-making could be realized through a totally different kind of organization—or “social movement”, one could say, or even better, “forms of collective action”—than what we have seen so far in Europe or Latin America. For example, movements that sometimes do not explicitly focus on the state, or even place themselves outside the state such as religious movements, youth culture or traditional revival associations. Precisely by doing so they attain political meaning, as is argued in the recent ASC publication *Movers and Shakers*.<sup>25</sup>

To sum up, it may be posited that the state in sub-Saharan Africa barely resembles the image we have in Europe of an ideal state. But as I argued, there is a possibility that neo-patrimonial state formations, which emerged from colonial and pre-colonial articulations and have developed historically, do under pressure from internal and external forces end up as developmental states. Such states will—and I hope this much has become clear to you in the meanwhile—still not resemble the Weberian state because the internal and external fields of societal forces are different and constantly changing. The current international context is moving in the direction of a multi-polar world in which a multitude of new actors like China, India and Brazil are starting to become active in sub-Saharan Africa. Old geopolitical considerations are disappearing or gaining new meanings, in which Africa's wealth of raw materials is playing a key role.

For this reason, I would like to dwell on what I would call the intractable geography of Africa, which is also relevant to the debate on the state in Africa.

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24 This is a specialization for Dutch development assistance that is particularly favoured by the WRR report, even giving some leeway to support Pentecostal Churches and Islamic Brotherhoods (WRR 2010: 271).

25 Ellis and van Kessel, *Introduction: African Social Movements or Social Movements in Africa?* (Ellis and van Kessel 2009: 1–16).

## The Intractable Geography of Africa

If one looks for arguments other than government policies for sub-Saharan Africa's lack of development in living standards, two factors come immediately to mind. High on the list is the colonial and neo-colonial dependency on external centres of power. A close runner-up would be the adverse natural conditions in Africa or, as I call it, the continent's intractable geography.

Africa is a large, relatively "closed-off" continent, with many landlocked countries far from the coast. For centuries it was not an easy continent to penetrate because of the lack of navigable rivers and this is still a relevant geographical feature today. Many sub-Saharan African countries are facing demands for investments in infrastructure as they are far from world markets and the cost of transporting goods is comparatively high.

Africa's climate should also be mentioned. It has a negative impact on the continent's general health due to the prevalence of diseases, like malaria, that affect labour productivity and life expectancy (Tang, Woods 2008; Bloom and Sachs 1998). Specific interactions of temperature, variability of precipitation, and soils mean that the climate directly contributes to the complex ecology in Africa and, in turn, limits its agricultural productivity. In the last few decades, the growth of agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa has been almost exclusively the result of an expansion in acreage—not in productivity. The Green Revolution and the technological improvements in agriculture with modern tillage techniques, high-yield crop varieties, fertilizers and pesticides, which have resulted in large increases in production in Asia, have not improved production levels in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This has been partly due to the dominant staple crops in sub-Saharan Africa—tuberous plants like yam and cassava, and tropical grains such as millet—for which no high-yielding varieties yet exist.<sup>26</sup> It also has to do with the complex agro-ecology of sub-Saharan Africa, for which it has turned out to be difficult to develop suitable, high-yielding crop varieties. In addition, a certain inertia among international organizations specialized in agricultural innovation has also played a role.<sup>27</sup>

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26 High-yielding varieties of rice and wheat did exist and these had most effect in irrigated areas or in rain-fed agriculture in lowlands with adequate water management.

27 The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) specialize in these marginal areas but their efforts haven't been very successful, according to Evenson and Gollin (2003).

One should not forget that many African governments pursued essentially anti-rural policies following independence. And then the subsequent abolishment of subsidies for agricultural inputs in the Structural Adjustment Programmes killed agricultural productivity. Fortunately recent crop improvements in rice, maize and cassava are starting to bear fruit in some areas. But there are still large differences in the availability and impact of suitable high-yield varieties in the various agro-ecological zones of sub-Saharan Africa (Evenson and Gollin 2003).

It may sound a bit strange to include Africa's mineral wealth in this argument of the continent's intractable geography. Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa was not originally known for its raw materials. However this perception has changed due to increased industrialization and the scarcity of raw materials in the world in general. New oilfields are rapidly being discovered and brought into production, new mines are being built and old ones rebuilt and the same goes for drilling rigs, pipelines, roads and railways and other related infrastructure. Foreign investment in Sudan has increased considerably in the last decade because of oil; Angola's economic prosperity is entirely due to oil; and Ghana and Uganda are eagerly awaiting similar results. However, the impact of sub-Saharan Africa's mineral wealth on its development is not always viewed positively. Some have expected a powerful incentive for economic growth (Sachs and Warner 1999), while others see negative effects such as increased government expenditure that may result in higher debt, inflation and economic destabilization—the so-called Dutch disease. Exploiting raw materials has few forward or backward linkages with the rest of the economy. And the cumulative effect of a wealth of minerals might well be less instead of more economic growth (Sachs and Warner 1999).

It is also argued that a wealth of raw materials has negative consequences on the process of state formation as increased investment and revenue from raw materials may lead to corruption. Nigeria is a good example of that. Countries that are dependent on their exports of raw materials appear to run a higher risk of civil war because rebel movements can finance their actions through the extortion of mine operators and traders (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). And this brings us to the debate about the resource curse. In this view, the geography of Africa is indeed intractable and puts it at a constant disadvantage. A strong government can of course avoid any negative relationship between the export of raw materials and corruption or civil war, but this is where the debate about the neo-patrimonial state comes in again. First of all, in the orthodox view, the neo-patrimonial state would only redistribute revenue instead of investing in economic growth. And secondly, precisely because of the enormous amounts of money available, the state can satisfy everyone and the political-administrative elite becomes less sensitive to so-

cial pressure from the population.<sup>28</sup> The example of Angola is apposite here: It has been characterized as a successful failing state thanks to a very efficiently organized national oil company, Sonangol, that ensures a constant income for the political-administrative elite (Soares de Oliveira 2007).

Now you are probably thinking, forget my suggestion that a neo-patrimonial state can also be a developmental state. However in my view, the point may be that such Weberian enclaves of efficiency within the neo-patrimonial state could become the new hotbeds of the developmental state.

The conclusion here about the intractable geography of Africa cannot be that economic growth or state formation are determined by natural conditions. In geography, the discipline that pre-eminently focuses on interactions between society, space and environment, for more than a century after an initial dispute between two schools of thought—French *possibilism* and German *determinism*—one is conscious of the fact that societal processes are not determined by natural conditions. However, some other social scientists do not seem to understand that as yet. It cannot be denied that the geographical context, alongside the historical context, impacts the development and development potentials of sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, geographical and historical contexts are never fixed.

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28 Bannon and Collier (2003). This argument is called the “resource rent”. The same argument, but then called the “aid rent”, is used to explain how African regimes, which were completely illegitimate in the eyes of their populations, could remain in power during the Cold War because of development aid; see Marysse, Ansoms and Cassimon (2007).

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## **Perspektiven der Afrikaforschung und der Entwicklung im subsaharischen Afrika**

**Zusammenfassung:** In seiner Abschiedsvorlesung als Professor für Entwicklung im subsaharischen Afrika an der Universität Leiden und als Direktor des African Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden illustriert der Autor unter Hinweis auf die Diskussionen um die *Vunuzelas*, wie gering das Vertrauen weltweit ist, dass der World Cup in Südafrika reibungslos organisiert und durchgeführt werden kann. Er sieht dies als Beispiel dafür, dass das Stereotyp der Inkompetenz in Afrika – trotz der sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Fortschritte auf dem Kontinent in der letzten Dekade – immer noch weit verbreitet ist. Er möchte nicht darüber klagen, dass die Afrikaforschung bislang nicht in der Lage war, ein solches Stereotyp zu beseitigen; vielmehr möchte er aufzeigen, dass die große Zahl handlungsorientierter Studien in der Afrikaforschung die wesentlichen sozialen, politischen und ökonomischen Trends in Afrika nicht klar herausgestellt hat. Er plädiert für eine Erhöhung der Relevanz handlungsorientierter Forschungsansätze, indem sie – durch Metaanalysen und vergleichende Forschung – zur Diskussion der sozialen, politischen und wirtschaftlichen Trends in Afrika beitragen. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit solle dem möglichen Wiederaufstieg des Entwicklungsstaates in Afrika gewidmet werden. Damit könne die Afrikaforschung auch ihren Anspruch untermauern, den Universalanspruch des Mainstreams der Sozialwissenschaften infrage zu stellen.

**Schlagwörter:** Afrika, Entwicklung, Afrikaforschung