



Programme Point Sud 2018

The Long-Term: Tracing Legacies of Violence in francophone Equatorial Africa

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Report

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The Long Term: Tracing Legacies of Violence in Francophone Equatorial Africa

Conveners

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In collaboration with the University Omar Bongo, Libreville Gabon

Themes and Objectives

This workshop sought to offer space to a balanced group of scholars from across the social sciences, with the objective of holistically debating the legacies of violence on present-day francophone Equatorial Africa (formerly French Equatorial Africa). We aimed to investigate the prolonged effects of social and governmental dysfunction of francophone Equatorial Africa as a region. The fact that, for an entire half-century after independence, it never developed as an integrated social, political or economic region (compared with other historical regions on the continent) makes this question more urgent. This entails not only strategic marginality – with resultant forms of destructive regional intervention or half-hearted international commitments – but also academic neglect.

Generally speaking, expertise on the countries in this region is scarce, and it has hardly ever been systematically studied as a region. This stands in sharp contrast with, for instance, West and East Africa, both of whom as regions are academically established subjects of study (consider for instance *The Journal of Eastern African Studies*). The aim of the workshop was thus threefold. First, we aimed at bringing together scholars on and from the region to see whether it makes sense to study it as a region. Second, we sought to explore the extent to which the particularly violent (pre-)colonial past impacted and transformed the social, political and economic developments in the region, along five overarching themes (see below). And third, we had the ambition to explore possibilities for future collaborations, networking and unlocking some of the knowledge on the region, by working towards a publication in English. The results on each of these objectives will be discussed under the next point. We decided to invite people whose work we knew in order to maintain a balance in expertise between countries and across disciplines. In doing so, we secured the active participation of anthropologists, political scientists, linguists, sociologists, and historians. We sent out five overarching themes in our call for proposals and after receiving the abstracts, we re-adjusted our program to accommodate the following themes:

- Long-term and regional perspectives
- Histories and memories of violence: (ir)relevance for current conditions of anomie
- Shifting cosmologies and religious dimensions
- Manifestations of socio-economic exploitation and resistance
- Groups, identity, and the violence of exclusion
- Legacies of chronic insecurity

The various contributions considered how the historical trajectories in the Equatorial region have been marked by developments that traumatised and transformed societies and cosmologies with which communities had made sense of the world. The approaches,

methodologies, and types of questions differed quite substantially, but all contributions reflected on the characteristics of a particular violent past and present of a region that remains largely and relatively understudied.

Methodology and Results

We used a rather classic conference format with paper presentations over five days. Participants presented their paper in about 25 minutes, after which a discussion of around 20 minutes would follow. The four convenors in turn chaired the different sessions, kept time and streamlined the discussions. In addition to the classic conference format, we facilitated thematic reflections in which the different papers were discussed from an overarching perspective. We also organized informal gatherings and activities in the evening and a guided excursion to important Catholic Church sites in Libreville by Prof. Dr. Herve Essono Mezui. The excursion in particular was of great historical and thematic relevance and allowed us to gain an insight into how the Catholic missionaries reached Gabon and how Christianity installed and subsequently transformed itself. The Point Sud staff at the University Omar Bongo (especially Fabert Mensa) did an extremely good job in locally organizing the workshop. From visa procedures to hotels, local transport, translation, and the venue, all was exceptionally well organized. The looming political tensions around the absence of the president's health – or even potential death – did not affect our workshop. The workshop venue allowed for informal exchange and group discussion, and important secondary requirements such as electricity and comfortable lunches worked out perfectly. With 10 female participants (out of 24, including convenors), 5 more junior scholars, and 8 from the sub-region, we feel that we reached the objective to balance expertise, experience, gender and origin quite well. Unfortunately, in the last weeks leading up to the workshop commencement we received notice that a few people from the region could no longer attend. As a consequence, the expertise on the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) was less than anticipated due to two cancellations in the last month. The full programme is attached as Annex 1 to this document.

So what did our deliberations over five days, along six overarching themes actually produce? It was our aim to provoke thinking regionally and over time, along the lines of the overarching theme of violence. Thinking regionally appeared more challenging than thinking in terms of (dis)continuities through time. The first element of discussion was on what the boundaries would be of this region when – at least for the purpose of the workshop – certain francophone countries were excluded (DR Congo most importantly), while others were included that actually don't speak French (Equatorial Guinea). One commonality in the region is the broad reference to Bantu culture (Rupp, Moussavou), the historically relative autonomy of different groups with an absence of overarching forms of governance or organisation, and the Congo River basin as a zone of contact and communication. At the same time, quite a few fault lines stand in the way of one coherent entity. In terms of geography, the divide between the forest areas (Gabon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and the southern parts of Cameroon and Central African Republic) and the savannah lands further north (northern parts of Cameroon, CAR and Chad) is important. Religious practices and traditions are further fault lines which course through the region with Islam dominating in the northern part and Christianity trying to get a foothold further south, where it co-exists with other cosmologies and religious practices. These fault lines feed into local and national politics and run through the social fabric on a more local scale (Mebiane), at times producing their own logic of violence (Ikougou-Renamy).

Although from the presentations it became clear that the imperial powers imposed themselves in different ways in different areas, it appeared that imperial rule was fundamentally weak and that one of the ways in which power could be imposed was through the destruction of existing

social fabrics and local economic systems (Bernault, Martino). The disguise of force and the resort to violence were expressions of the weak imposition of power by the French and Spanish colonizers (Okenve). In response, colonial officers created various forms of interactions and alliances across the various groups and hence resistance and coalitions also differed across the region (Walraven, Ramondy, Terreta). Some of these dynamics also formed the basis of the first post-colonial states and hence similar processes of alliances and resistance emerged (Hoinathy, Ketzmerick, Kiriakou). So while it may be hard to define the region along sharp lines, it is evident that certain roots of present-day societies, in terms of the pre-colonial social fabric and the impact of colonial rule, are shared across what we broadly define as Equatorial Africa.

The second axis, on the developments over time, was also source of discussion, with a focus on whether we should see developments over time through the lens of continuities or ruptures. How do pre-colonial roots explain today's characteristics of the social and political fabric? Should we see the anomy that characterized colonization as a rupture and to what extent does the aftermath of this relative short period still have explanatory force in today's developments? Various presentations argued that identity formations are neither fixed by spatial boundaries nor sharply distinguishable in separate time-frames. The hybridity of identity, and the crossing of social and spatial boundaries are of all times (Wilson, Ceriana Mayneri). Yet, arguably more so than in the past, the identity formations have become part and parcel of the conflict dynamics shaping societies in the region today, feeding the fault lines that politicians and other actors maintain in order to sustain their power base (Bakary, Batianga-Kinzi, Mehler).

Another continuity that can be observed over time and across the region is the concessionary nature of economic exploitation and the precarity of the workforce. While large parts of the national economies operate in the realm of the informal, the state is the most important employer. Nonetheless, the position of a salaried worker comes with certain insecurities and difficulties, if only because entire extended families often depend on the modest salary of one or two individuals, or because public institutions lag behind their more developed counterparts in paying the salaries in the first place (Ndombi, Moukoula Ndoumou). In addition to the public domain, few sectors keep the economies of the region going. The exploitation of natural resources through the system of concessions to mostly European companies has always been an important foundation of the colonial enterprise. Essentially, this system remained intact after independence, with the difference that oil was discovered only in the decades after and has shaped some of the country's economies and social economies in a detrimental and rather fundamental way (Mangarella). The exploitation of oil feeds into the regional power balance and its geopolitical clout. The position of Equatorial Africa in the world is to a large part contingent on oil exploitation and the way in which the financial windfalls are used to benefit the powers in place (Behrends). This has become very clear in moments of crisis, like for instance in the Central African Republic or in the Sahel, which offered Chad the opportunity to exploit its new strategic position to the advantage of its interest in containing the crisis in a certain way.

To conclude, what is the place of violence in this broad historical and regional context? Two observations can be made. First of all, different forms of violence appear in the mundane. Everyday life, both in the world of the living and the worlds of the dead, is characterized by violence. Religious practice, identity formations and everyday politics are perhaps the most important dynamics in which forms of inclusion and exclusion can take violent forms. Such violence is not necessarily physical, often has meta-physical components, and plays its part in non-hierarchized relations. The second type of violence can be observed in the context of power relations. Often the everyday forms of violence feed into the broader dynamics of relations between elites and people. Here we see both the physical forms of harm and the violence of oppression. Regardless of the exact type of violence that is exercised, auxiliary

forces are needed to conduct and maintain the system of exploitation and/or oppression. Under the colonial regimes, one could think of social groups that were privileged over others and took on the role of auxiliaries, such as the tirailleurs (Sénégalais) or traitants working for concessionaires. In the present day, auxiliaries that exercise different forms violence vary from rebel groups to national security services or even international companies.

Ultimately, the social dynamics in the region may not be entirely similar. The forms of social organisation and governance, the nature of the economies, the legacies of conflict or the absence thereof, and the place of the different countries in the regional context, mainly point towards a large variation. This might well explain why the region never really established itself as a regional block vis-à-vis other blocks on the continent. But what rings through in most papers on the region, whether from the past or from the present, is a sense of loss: The loss of land, social organisation, autonomy, memory, and ultimately control. The sense of loss should not be mistaken for the absence of agency, however. Instead, people incorporated and adapted to the elements of disintegration that characterized societies, and continue to do so today. It is under conditions of incessant transformation that mundane, symbolic and structural forms of violence continue to form an important part of social and political life in Equatorial Africa.

Sustainability of the Event

The issue of the sustainability of the event coincides with the third objective of the workshop: To explore possibilities for future collaborations, networking and unlocking some of the knowledge on the region, by working towards a publication in English.

After careful deliberations among the convenors we decided against publishing a joint edited volume. We had three main reasons for this: The number of papers exceeds the realistic possibility of a publication, which implies that we would need to make a selection, which is not necessarily in the spirit of the conference. Secondly, the thematic and disciplinary variation would make for a rather eclectic volume of varying quality. Third, and sadly, the publication of edited volumes is not considered of much academic value in many universities. This means that our time-investment would not be rewarded in our academic positions. Participants did not seem particularly disappointed about this, partly because some of them too are not rewarded for book chapters. Since we nonetheless aim to spread the word about the workshop and about the reflections it produced, we instead aim to write a publishable report that can appear in an academic African Studies journal such as perhaps *Afrika Spectrum*, published open access by GIGA Hamburg. In spirit of workshop, we hope to also find academic outlets in French and Spanish.

The networking and exchange elements of the workshop seem to have worked out rather well. We have a joined Whatsapp group in which we have started to share publications but also information on the averted coup in Gabon early January and other unfolding events across the region. Another possibility for continuing our joint activities is joining the Central African Studies Association (CASA), which is a mostly US-based network of scholars working on the region and established in 2008. More informally, the workshop offered all of us to establish linkages for potential future projects, exchanging on teaching, and joint publications.

Participants

1. Dr. Djanabou Bakary, History, University of Maroua, Cameroon
2. Maria Ketzmerck, PhD-candidate, Political Science, University of Marburg, Germany
3. Dr. Stephanie Rupp, Anthropology, City University, New York, USA
4. Dr. Meredith Terretta, Law, University of Ottawa, Canada
5. Catherina Wilson, PhD-candidate, History/Anthropology, Leiden University, Netherlands
6. Sylvain Batianga Kinzi, PhD-candidate, Anthropology, University Aix/Marseille, France
7. Dr. Andrea Meyneri Ceriana, Anthropology, France
8. Dr. Karine Ramondy, History, University Paris I, France
9. Prof. Andrea Behrends, Anthropology, Free University Berlin, Germany
10. Dr. Hoinathy Remadji, Anthropology, University of Ndjamen, Chad
11. Héloïse Kiriakou, PhD-candidate, History, University Paris I, France
12. Dr. Enrique Martino, History, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
13. Dr. Enrique Okenve, History, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica
14. Prof Florence Bernault, History, University of Wisconsin, USA
15. Dr. Lionel C Ikogou-Renamy, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
16. Prof. Dimitri Ndombi, Sociology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
17. Prof. Guy-Max Moussavou, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
18. Dr. Maixant Mebiame, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
19. Dr. Raymond Mayer, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
20. Dr. Mike Moukoulou Ndoumou, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
21. Prof. Andreas Mehler, Political Science, ABI, University of Freiburg
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26. Dr. Arielle Ekang Mve, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
27. Dr. Célestine Koumba, Sociology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
28. Amélie Mogo, PhD-candidate, Anthropology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
29. Dr. Filipa Duarte, Sociology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
30. Herve Essono Mezui, Mission Guide, History, Gabon