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Celebrating the Nation, Debating the Nation: Independence Jubilees, National Days, and the Politics of Commemoration in Africa

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Report

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Celebrating the Nation, Debating the Nation: Independence Jubilees, National Days, and the Politics of Commemoration in Africa

Organisers

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Themes and Objectives

The workshop explored the politics and aesthetics of national celebrations in Africa, focusing especially on the independence jubilees that seventeen African states organised in 2010.

The workshop theme started from the assumption that nation-building and state-making undoubtedly depend on the creation of a corps of ‘national’ bureaucrats and institutions, the construction of a material infrastructure that supports nation-wide communication, and the dissemination of schools and education. Just as important, however, is a symbolic dimension, namely, the creation of national emblems and symbols such as flags, anthems, stamps, language, and the (re)writing of ‘national’ history. Creating a national ‘imaginary’ implies the reconfiguration of space (renaming the country, landscape features, cities, streets and places; erecting monuments and memorial sites, etc.) as well as the restructuring of time, crafting a national calendar and designating certain days as focal points of commemoration. It was the politics and poetics of commemoration involved in the creation and celebration of national days that stood at the centre of attention of the workshop – a theme that has, so far, with regard to Africa not received the scholarly interest that it deserves.

The workshop brought together, with the aim of developing a comparative perspective on national days, scholars from different African countries, members of a doctoral research group of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Mainz University that studies the independence celebrations in six African states, as well as a number of European colleagues who have studied national celebrations in and beyond Africa. More specifically, the convenors invited the workshop participants to explore

- the complex and often contested histories of national days and the place of the commemoration of independence in the nation-state’s festive calendar;
- strategies of referring to the pre-colonial and colonial past as well as post-colonial developments (e.g. an emphasis on continuities or ruptures with the present);
- ways of linking national and regional or ethnic identities (e.g. concepts of ‘unity in diversity’ versus ‘unity through homogeneity’);
- styles of communication and public debates on (national) history and cultural representations of the nation (celebrations ‘from above’ and/or ‘from below’);
- tensions between ‘branding’ unique nations and international, travelling models of festive formats.

National celebrations represent constitutive and cathartic moments of nation-building that aim at enhancing citizens’ emotional attachments to the country. At the same time, they become

forums of critical reflection about what should constitute the norms and values making up national identity. Furthermore, they provide space for the articulation of new demands for public recognition. A study of independence celebrations and, more generally, national days thus enables scholars to explore contested processes of nation-building and images of nationhood. The overall objective of the workshop was therefore to analyse the debates surrounding the organisation of national days, as well as the imagery and performances they employ, and to uncover the underlying fault lines and challenges of nation-building.

Methodology and Results

The workshop brought together scholars from ten African and five European countries, with a multidisciplinary background that encompassed sociology, anthropology, history, political science, social psychology as well as media and heritage studies. All invited participants presented ethnographically or historiographically informed case studies on national days and/or independence jubilees in altogether fourteen different African countries, namely Namibia (Akuupa, Becker, Kornes, Williams), South Africa (Marschall, Rassool), Zimbabwe (Willems), Madagascar (Rajanarison, Randriamarolaza, Späth), Rwanda (Brandstetter, Kabwete), Gabon (Fricke, Mamboundou), the DR Congo (Pype), Cameroon (Yenshu Vubo), Nigeria (Ajala, Martineau), Benin (Martineau, Tchantipo), Ghana (de-Graft Aikins, Lentz), Burkina Faso (Haberecht), Côte d'Ivoire (N'Guessan) and Mali (Schulz, Diallo). These case studies were complemented by two papers that provided a comparative perspective beyond Africa, one discussing the history of European national days (Elgenius), and the other elaborating the contribution of anthropological theories about symbols, social drama, and related concepts towards the study of national days (Eriksen). The inclusion of these non-Africanist papers was greatly appreciated by all workshop participants and helped place the African case studies in a broader perspective on nation-building and national days.

In order to help bridge the Anglophone/Francophone language barrier, all contributors were asked to prepare their written papers in English, which were then circulated among participants before the conference. This allowed the majority of Francophone colleagues who could read, but sometimes not fluently speak English to follow the oral presentations which each participant was free to give in whichever language he or she preferred. Malian participants (without their own contributions) who had not received the papers beforehand were offered access to the written papers during and after the conference. Discussions were held mainly in English, with French summaries provided by bilingual participants, as well as sometimes, depending on the case studies presented, in French, with English translations of major arguments. The two interpreters provided by Point Sud were specialised in written, not oral translation, and found it difficult to provide simultaneous translations for the few participants who were completely mono-lingual. However, on the whole, the combination of their efforts and, more importantly, the makeshift solution offered by the participants themselves made the discussions, or at least large parts of them, intelligible for all present.

In order to relate the workshop theme to Malian experiences and perspectives, one day of the programme was reserved for an excursion to major national monuments in Bamako as well as a visit to the National Museum of Mali where the director, Dr. Samuel Sidibé, offered an informative overview of the museum's history and current exhibition policies. Accompanied by a guide from the Malian Tourist Board and supported by explanations of participants

familiar with Malian history and politics of commemoration, the group visited, among others, the independence monument, the Modibo Keita memorial (with excellent explanations by a staff member of the memorial centre), the Monument to the Martyrs of 1991, and the murals, the *Parc des Explorateurs* and the *Place des Nations* and the *Carré des Cités et Villes Martyres du Mali* at Koulouba. The entire excursion was greatly appreciated by all participants, and it encouraged fruitful comparisons between Mali's and other African states' commemorative politics and public monuments. The day ended with a well-attended and animated public round table at the *Maison de la Presse* that discussed the theme of 'Mémoire et usages publics de l'histoire'. Participants of the debate, chaired by Carola Lentz, were Doulaye Konaté (President of the Association of Malian Historians as well as of the African Historians), Samuel Sidibé (Director of the National Museum), Louis Paul Randriamarolaza (Université d'Antananarivo), and Odile Goerg (Université Paris VII). Stimulated not least by comments from non-Malian African workshop participants, the debate soon focused on the specific challenges that Malian academic historians and organisers of commemorative events faced with respect to the country's highly controversial political past.

As for the outcome of the workshop itself, the focus on national celebrations proved to be well chosen and provided an excellent window into broader issues of nation-building as well as methodological questions of how to study the symbolic dimensions of nation-state-making. Here, we can only briefly present a few aspects on which the discussions centred.

Methodological challenges of studying national days

The workshop participants agreed that there is a danger of overemphasising the importance and popularity of the 'nation' by focussing one's research exclusively on national days. The only 'way out' is a comparative perspective that places the study of national days both in a temporal and spatial perspective (a 'vertical' and 'horizontal' widening of the focus), by looking at the historical changes in national celebrations as well as considering national festivities in places outside the capital. Furthermore, national days should be explored in their relations with other festivities, national symbols, state rituals and practices of commemoration and remembrance as well as with (non-festive) everyday life.

A further challenge is constituted by the fact that national days constitute a 'fait social total' (Marcel Mauss), and encompass a broad variety of practices of commemoration and joyful celebration that employ different media and formats (speeches and songs, wreath laying ceremonies, icons and images, parades and other state rituals, historical re-enactments, folkloristic performances and cloths etc.). Their exploration thus needs an interdisciplinary approach.

A much discussed question was whether binary oppositions such as 'from above' versus 'from below', or 'from the centre' versus 'from the margins' were at all useful in understanding the complex configurations of the official design of the celebration by political elites, and various responses (or, as it were, boycott or counter-celebrations) by the broader population. The workshop participants agreed that such simplistic dichotomies did not do justice to the intricate nuances of popular (dis)engagement with national day celebrations. However, they also insisted that there were noticeable differences in the degrees of 'participation' and/ or 'ownership' of the celebrations, and that not everybody had the same authority to enforce a certain kind of ritual performance or design of the state ceremony –

distinctions that somehow need to be addressed by researchers, even when simplifying divisions between compliance or acceptance versus resistance must be overcome.

Commemoration versus celebration

A second strand of discussion explored the tension between commemoration that often focuses on sacrifice and suffering, on the one hand, and, on the other, joyous, pleasurable celebration that fosters patriotism (or glorifies those in power) through popular festivities such as musical galas, football matches, carnivals and similar formats. In some countries, these opposing dynamics seems to be resolved by the introduction of a diversified 'liturgical' calendar that separates national days of mourning past sacrifices and losses from days of more joyful celebration oriented towards the present and future. Alternatively, a single national day is often structured temporally, beginning the day with a more solemn part and concluding it with a joyful, celebratory part. Furthermore, comparison between examples from national days in more recently independent countries like Zimbabwe and Namibia and states that celebrated their golden jubilees of independence revealed that over time, with increasing temporal distance from the struggles leading towards independence, elements of joyful 'cultural nationalism' become ever more important in national day designs. However, the trend towards featuring 'partying', football games and concerts more prominently may also be due to changing tastes and contemporary fashions of 'event' management.

In any case, it is important not to minimise or spurn the impact that 'partying' and popular pleasure may have on building the nation and fostering patriotism. Large collective events can create an experience of spontaneous community, and may in themselves become commemorated events (the many photographs taken during the festivities testify to this trend) that in turn foster a sense of national sentiment and belonging. Whether 'serious' state ritual or joyful displays of patriotic sentiments, in both fields politics and spectacle intermingle, and aesthetic considerations play an important role in the staging and reproducing of power. Methodologically, a focus on 'performance' is fruitful in that it allows the researcher to investigate the 'risks' inherent in the staging of the nation and the state during the national days. As the unforeseen interruptions of the parades in some countries (Congo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire) illustrate, state officials manage to control these ceremonies only a certain extent.

Potent symbols and travelling models of celebration

A number of papers showed that the 'emptier' national symbols are, the greater their unifying capacity, or, as one participant put it, the more national days have been 'drained' of their (original) meaning, the more they can incorporate different histories and the more robust they are. With respect to the independence jubilees, we can observe that 'independence' has become a distant and relatively open signifier that can potentially support the reconciliation of past and current political rifts. At the same time, some of the images (photographs, icons, classic music pieces etc.) used during the celebrations could also instil a sense of nostalgia towards the 'open' moment of independence, and reinvigorate past hopes, promises and sense of unity. Furthermore, 'independence', or other historical events commemorated by national days, can become symbols which condense various layers of time, referring not only to the achievement of independence fifty years ago, but also to the more distant history of, for instance, pre-colonial empires (as in Madagascar and Mali) or rather recent developments of, for example, democratisation or other regime changes (as in Côte d'Ivoire and Benin). In this

sense, national days can become important ‘sites of memory’, to use Pierre Nora’s term, that accommodate competing versions of national history and opposite visions of the nation.

Furthermore, there seemed to be a time dimension involved. Early independence celebrations, particularly in states that recently gained their autonomy through armed struggle, seem to resort to ‘standardised’ formats of commemoration in order to control excessive emotions (present through the presence of individuals who have actively participated in the past struggles). The organisers of long-established national days, on the other hand, sometimes face the difficulty of routine and absence of (patriotic) emotions which they seek to revive by introducing innovative festive formats.

Comparing the national days and independence jubilees of different countries, the importance of ‘travelling models’ of the overall design as well as the various components of the celebrations becomes evident. This concerns traditional nationalist performances, such as singing of the national hymns, wreath laying ceremonies, civil and military parades, as well as more recent formats like the ‘happy birthday’ chants or the presidential cutting of birthday cakes in the form of the national territory and in national colours that could be observed during the 2010 jubilees. More generally, participants agreed that the display of national symbols was always directed not only at a domestic, but also an international public, and that efforts at ‘branding’ the nation aim at establishing uniqueness and engage in a competition between nation-states at the same time.

Sustainability of the Event

The participants came from different national backgrounds as well as various disciplines, and the reading of the other participants’ papers as well the extended discussions during the workshop familiarised all participants with new bodies of literature. The workshop thus contributed to broadening everyone’s intellectual horizons.

Furthermore, the workshop brought together senior and junior scholars, thus extending the networks of the doctoral students and recent post-graduates, both from Africa and Europe. It also allowed the ‘juniors’ to familiarise themselves with conference practices. Communication between senior and junior participants was particularly enhanced by the fact that an excursion on Sunday, before the beginning of the official academic part of the conference programme, allowed participants to establish informal links and acquaint themselves in a relaxed and friendly setting. This, together with the joint visit of the national monuments, provided a positive workshop atmosphere, enabling participants to engage in fruitful critical, but at the same time mutually supportive discussions. The non-competitive and non-hierarchical atmosphere encouraged junior scholars to intervene and bring in their own ideas and constructive criticisms.

One of the most important outcomes of the workshop is certainly the establishment of new informal Africa-wide academic networks, particularly connecting Anglophone and Francophone scholars, as well as scholars from Southern, Central and West Africa.

The public round table – bringing together historians and ‘practitioners’ of heritage and commemoration – encouraged discussions about the *cinquantenaire* that obviously had not yet taken place in the Malian public sphere, and may have a lasting effect, not least due to the reports published by the media. More generally, public round tables in connection with the

Point Sud international workshops seem to have become an established and well-functioning format.

As for the academic outcome of the workshop, a publication of a selection of revised conference papers is planned.

Participants

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