

## **Introduction to the international symposium “Frontiers of African Studies”**

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On behalf of the African Studies Center – Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, I would like to express a hearty welcome to all of you participating this symposium titled “Frontiers of African Studies” In this brief opening speech, please let me explain, as an organizer, the basic aim of this academic meeting.

As our president pointed out in his welcome speech, the major objective of ASC is to conduct researches on Africa’s actual problems. This symposium is planned to raise consciousness and deepen understandings of contemporary problems in Africa, in particular those related to its politics, economies, and environment. I do not want to emphasize that Africa has a lot of problems. It is true that African is tackling many problems today, but it is just like Japan currently faces a lot of difficulties. In emphasizing too much “African predicaments”, there is a danger to seek solutions too hastily before obtaining accurate understanding. Research should be conducted as much for finding solutions as for understanding the realities. We need to understand what is happening before proposing solutions. This is all the more important because Africa is changing very rapidly.

While current issues that Africa is tackling are various, they could be tentatively put in order under three major topics, namely 1) politics and international relations, 2) economy and development, 3) environment and climate changes. These are titles of three sessions of this symposium. However, I would emphasize that these titles of the sessions do not mean disciplines or methodologies disconnecting each other. Instead, the titles indicate three closely connected research fields. Today, six papers deal with problems in these fields. While the scope of each paper would be different, they surely have common perspectives and research interests. I am convinced that six presentations and discussions that follows will deepen the understandings of today’s Africa.

## 1. Main issues of contemporary Africa

Let me start by presenting a brief overview of current issues in Africa. With regard to politics, democracy and conflicts are two major and intertwined issues. Following the end of the Cold War, Africa saw a drastic transition from one-party or military rules to multi-party democracies in a short period. Currently, an overwhelming majority of African countries adopts democratic system of government. However, institutional changes have not ensured substantial progress of democracy. There are many *de facto* authoritarian regime in a guise of democratic system.

One of the recent important issue of debates has been whether democracy has been retreated in Africa. There are a series of debates on this problem (Cheeseman 2015). Some researchers argue that democratization in Africa has been stagnant since the 2000s (Harbeson 2013). In fact, a number of African countries such as Chad, Congo-Brazzaville and Rwanda abolished the term limit of their presidential elections. However, the story is not so simple, as democratic elections have been successfully carried out also in many countries including Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria. Even if some indicators regarding democracy tend to have been stagnant and/or aggravating since the mid-2000s, the democratic values have been consistently appreciated in Africa, where people stand in a long queue for voting. This seems to be contrasting with the situation in some countries in the “First World”, where the trust for democracy has been undermined in the face of rising populism.

In African studies, the issue of the state, and how the state is governed have been one of the central subjects of research (Bayart 1993, Herbst 2000). Particular concepts such as a neo-patrimonial rule have been developed for explaining realities of politics, rules and governance in Africa. Analyses regarding armed conflicts have shown particular interests in these aspects of politics. Overwhelming majority of African conflicts have been internal wars within the state. In other words, they are contestation against the state, absence of the political order, and lack of the state capacity to provide public goods. African states have been a center of debates in conflict studies.

An important point of argument is changes in characteristics of armed conflict (Straus 2012). In comparison with the 1990s when Africa saw many

serious armed conflicts including Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, the number of conflicts and victims caused by conflicts have decreased since the 2000s. This is not to say that Africa has succeeded in conflict resolution and peace-building. Rather, it is the nature of conflict that has changed. In recent period, great civil wars might become fewer comparing with the 1990s, with exception to cases of Mali, Central African Republic and South Sudan. However, local-level conflicts regarding resources such as land and water tend to have been increasing.

In these two decades, we have witnessed a series of efforts that African countries have provided for containing armed conflicts in the region. Establishment of African Union in 2002 represented a landmark in this regard. Institutionalization of conflict resolution has been considerably progressed in the level of regional organizations since then. Such efforts have been certainly difficult to produce remarkable results, as shown in the serious situation in South Sudan. But the efforts have really brought about positive outcomes. Gambia's relatively peaceful regime change at the beginning of this year could not be able to take place without an intervention of ECOWAS. The regional organizations in Africa have increasingly played important roles, not only in a political aspect. Progress of economic integration through regional organizations is one of such examples. While the progress has been generally slow, institutionalization of economy within each African region deserves special attention.

With regard to African economy, evaluation of recent rapid economic growth would be an important subject of research. Since the mid-1990s, Africa has seen a strong economic growth and its total GDP has doubled. How can we evaluate this consecutive economic growth? What is clear thus far is that the mechanism of this rapid economic growth has been different from that of Asian predecessors. In East and Southeastern Asian countries, it is foreign direct investments in the manufacturing sector that has been a driving force of economic growth. In Africa, it is the FDI in the mining sector that has significantly boosting the economies. While the growth in manufacturing sector increases the income of laborers through the distribution of salaries for workers, that in mining sector is likely to widen the income gap as the number of beneficiaries from the economic growth are much smaller. We need to observe consequences of this specific pattern of economic growth.

The rapid economic growth in Africa has been sustained in the context of globalization and neo-liberalism. The macro-level rapid economic growth has triggered enormous changes in African societies. Landscape of rural Africa has drastically transformed in a couple of decades. The most striking one has been the proliferation of large-scale land deals, through which a huge swath of lands has been transferred from rural communities to other actors like foreign companies and national political elites. To explain this drastic rural change, policies on private property rights have been one of the key factors. Under the influence of donors and their liberal ideology, policies for establishing private property rights has been actively promoted in Africa, thus facilitating privatization and marketization of the land. While we do not know exactly the consequences of these drastic rural changes, careful attention should be paid, in considering the high speed of population increase.

According to the United Nations' World Population Prospects revised in June 2017, the population in the African continent will exceed 4 billion and will be equal with that of Asia including China and India at the end of this century. Nigeria will be a country with 800 million and Ethiopia with 250 million. Enormous size of the countries indicates their economic and political importance. It is no doubt that Africa will strengthen its position in the future politics and economy in the world. But, obviously, this is not only a good news. The UN prospects that in 2100 the population in Mali will be around 80 million and almost equal with that of Japan. It is difficult for us to imagine whether the economy and the environment of the country will be able to sustain this size of population. What we can say at this stage is that the technology for peaceful management will be imperative not only in terms of politics but also of economies and environments in Africa.

Although the protection of environment and climate change cannot be argued without knowledge on natural sciences, they are deeply related to social sciences. Drastic reduction of elephant in Africa has been strongly related to legal regulation system in Asian countries including Japan and of course to rapid economic growth in China. Outbreaks of armed conflicts in Darfur and Mali were undoubtedly connected with severe and repeated droughts in Sahel regions. There is a broad consensus that building a good relationship with local communities is imperative for the success of conservation policies. In short, understanding political economy of environmental problems is indispensable for seeking feasible solutions.

## **2. The frontiers of African Studies**

Why do we study Africa? This question may sound a bit naive. Of course, its answers shall be various. But, I think this is an important question and it deserves to be raised, particularly when a foreigner like me study Africa.

First of all, we carry out researches for tackling problems that African people are now facing. We sincerely hope that our researches contribute to combat such problems as poverty, armed conflicts, environmental degradation, and reduction of wildlife. At the same time, we understand that such problems are too complex to find solutions in a short period, and that hasty prescriptions are often dangerous in creating other problems. Still, it is no doubt that contributing to the resolution of current problems in Africa in a long run is our major motivation for conducting researches.

At the same time, understanding realities in Africa has been our strong motivation for research. Why do we want to understand it? Fundamentally, the reason is simply what happened in Africa is so interesting, so fascinating or so terrible that we felt compelled to study further. The motivation is basically selfish, as it is not for Africa but for ourselves. But, I would appreciate this selfish motivation for better understanding. There are several reasons for this. At first, the research activity is generally so hard that it is difficult without such a selfish motivation to continue laborious works in a long run. In addition, better understanding is indispensable for better prescription. An in-depth understanding is a precondition for good policy making. Lastly, a better understanding of Africa leads us to better understanding of the whole world, of Japan, and of ourselves. The nature of African studies, and area studies in general, is reflective. When we study deeply Africa, our perspective for the world will become much broader and better balanced than before. This enables us to have clearer views for our own realities.

What I would like to emphasize here is that there are a number of motivations for African studies. While many researchers participate in this symposium, their fundamental motivations for research might be different each other. Researchers gather in this conference room from all over the world with various motivations for African studies. In my opinion, this is an

outstanding merit of an international academic meeting. Different motivations lead to different perspectives, methodologies and arguments. We will surely be able to learn each other from different arguments and discussion among us. I believe that it is this exchange of different views and ideas that we can explore the frontiers of African Studies.

## Reference

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