

Introduction to the International Symposium 'Frontiers of African Studies'

Shinichi Takeuchi

Director, African Studies Center – Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

On behalf of the African Studies Center, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (ASC-TUFS), I would like to express a hearty welcome to all participating in this symposium entitled, 'Frontiers of African Studies'. In this brief introduction, let me explain the basic aims of this academic meeting as an organiser.

As the president of TUFS pointed out in his welcome speech, the major objective of the ASC is to conduct research on Africa's actual problems. This symposium was planned to raise awareness and deepen understanding of contemporary problems in Africa, particularly those related to its politics, economics, and environment. I do not want to emphasise that Africa is full of problems. Certainly, Africa is confronting a number of challenges today, similar to how Japan also currently faces many difficulties. In over-emphasising 'African predicaments', there is the danger of too hastily seeking solutions before accurately understanding the problems. Research should be conducted as much to find solutions as to understand realities. We need to understand what is happening before proposing solutions. This is even more important because Africa is changing very rapidly.

While Africa currently faces various challenges, they can be tentatively classified as three major topics, namely 1) politics and international relations, 2) economy and development, and 3) environment and climate changes. These are the titles of the three sessions in this symposium. I emphasise that these titles do not mean disciplines or methodologies disconnected from each other. Instead, they indicate three closely connected research fields. Today, six papers deal with various problems in these fields. While the scope of each paper is different, they share common perspectives and research interests. I am convinced that the six presentations and discussions to follow will bring about a deeper understanding of contemporary Africa.

1. Main Issues in Contemporary Africa

I start by presenting a brief overview of the current challenges in Africa. Regarding 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 have adopted a democratic government system. However, institutional changes have not ensured the substantial progress of democracy. There are many *de facto* authoritarian regimes disguised as democratic systems.

A recent important debate has been on whether democracy has been side-lined in Africa. There are a series of debates on this problem (Cheeseman 2015). Some researchers argue that democratisation 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 limit of the term of their presidential elections. It seems as though autocratic personal rules strengthened in these countries. However,

the story is not that simple, as democratic elections have also been successfully carried out 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, democratic values have been consistently appreciated in Africa, where people stand in long queues to vote. This seems to contrast the situation in some countries in the 'First World', where trust in democracy has been undermined in the face of rising populism.

In African studies, the issue of the state and how it is governed is a central subject of research (Bayart 1993, Herbst 2000). Specific concepts such as neo-patrimonial rule have been developed to explain the realities of politics, rules, and governance in Africa. Analyses of armed conflicts have focused on these aspects of politics. Most African conflicts have been internal wars within the state. In other words, they take place as contestations against the state and are triggered by the state's lack of capacity to provide public goods. As such, African states remain at the centre of the debates in conflict studies.

Furthermore, scholars have pointed out changes in the characteristics of armed conflict (Straus 2012). Compared to the 1990s, when Africa faced frequent serious armed conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, the number of victims has decreased since the 2000s. This is not to say that Africa has succeeded in conflict resolution and peace building activities. Rather, the nature of conflict has transformed. Furthermore, the number of great civil wars has decreased since the 2000s, excepting in Mali, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. However, local-level conflicts regarding resources such as land and water have increased.

In these two decades, we have witnessed efforts by African countries to contain armed conflicts in the region. The establishment of the African Union in 2002 represented a landmark in this regard. The institutionalisation of conflict resolution has progressed considerably at the regional organisational level since then. However, these efforts have faced difficulties in producing remarkable results, as evident in the serious situation in South Sudan. Note though that these efforts have also had positive outcomes. Gambia's relatively peaceful regime change at the beginning of this year would not have taken place without the effective intervention of ECOWAS. Regional organisations in Africa have increasingly played important roles not only in terms of politics. One example is the progress of economic integration through regional organisations. While progress has been generally slow, institutionalisation of the economy in each African region deserves special attention.

Regarding the African economy, recent rapid economic growth is an important subject of research. Since the mid-1990s, Africa has experienced strong economic growth, and the size of its total GDP has doubled. How do we evaluate this consecutive economic growth? Clear thus far is that the mechanism of this rapid economic growth has differed from that of Asian predecessors. In East and South-eastern Asian countries, foreign direct investments (FDI) in the manufacturing sector were a driving force of economic growth. In Africa, the FDI in the mining sector has significantly boosted the economy. While the growth in the manufacturing sector enhances development of the middle class through the distribution of salaries for workers, rapid growth in the mining sector is likely to widen the income gap, benefiting a smaller number of beneficiaries. We need to observe the consequences of this pattern of economic growth in Africa.

This pattern of rapid economic growth has been sustained in the context of globalisation and neo-liberalism. Rapid economic growth at the macro-level has had an enormous impact on African societies. The rural African landscape has drastically transformed in a couple of decades. The most striking change is the proliferation of large-scale land deals, through which a huge swath of lands has

been transferred from rural communities to other actors including foreign companies and national political elites. To explain this drastic rural change, policies on private property rights have been a key factor. Influenced by donors and their liberal ideology, policies for establishing private property rights are actively promoted in Africa, facilitating privatisation and marketisation of the land. While we do not know the exact consequences of these drastic rural changes, they should be carefully examined, particularly in the context of the rapid increase in Africa's population.

According to the United Nations World Population Prospects revised in June 2017, the population of the African continent will exceed 4 billion and equal that of Asia including China and India at the end of this century. Nigeria will have a population of 800 million people, and Ethiopia 250 million. The large size of these countries indicates their economic and political importance. Undoubtedly, Africa will strengthen its position in the future politics and economy of the world. However, obviously, this is not only good news. The United Nations forecasts that in 2100, Mali's population will be around 80 million, almost equal to that of Japan. It is difficult for us to imagine whether the economy and environment of the country will be able to sustain a population this size. At this stage, we can say that technologies for peaceful management will be imperative in terms of politics as well as economies and environments in Africa.

Although protecting the environment and climate change cannot be argued without knowledge of the natural sciences, they are deeply related to the social sciences. The drastic decrease in the number of elephants in Africa is strongly related to legal regulations of ivory 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 the Sahel region. There is broad consensus that building a good relationship with local communities is imperative for the success of conservation policies. In short, understanding the political economy of environmental problems is important in seeking feasible solutions.

2. The Frontiers of African Studies

Why do we study Africa? This question may sound naïve, and may have various answers. However, I think this is an important question to raise, particularly when a foreigner like me studies Africa.

First, we conduct research to tackle the problems African people now face. We sincerely hope that our research contributes to combatting problems such as chronic poverty, serious armed conflicts, environmental degradation, and the diminishing wildlife. At the same time, we understand that such problems are too complex to solve in a short period, and that hasty prescriptions are often dangerous and create other problems. Still, contributing to resolving the current problems in Africa in the long term is our major motivation to conduct these studies.

Furthermore, understanding the realities in Africa has been a strong motivation for our research. Why do we want to understand this? Fundamentally, the reason is simply that what happened in Africa is very interesting, fascinating, and so terrible that we feel compelled to study the situation further. Essentially, the motivation is selfish, as it is not for Africa, but for ourselves. Regardless, I appreciate this selfish motivation to gain a better understanding for several reasons. First, research activity is generally so hard that it is difficult to continue laborious work in the long term without a selfish motive. In addition, better understanding is indispensable for better prescription. An in-depth understanding is a precondition for good policy making. Last, a better understanding of Africa leads to a better understanding of the world, of Japan, and of ourselves. The nature of African studies, and area studies in general, is substantially reflective. When we study Africa in depth, our perspective of

the world will broaden and be better balanced than before. This provides us with clearer views for our own society.

I would like to emphasise that there are a number of motivations for African studies. While many researchers participate in this symposium, their motivations for research might differ. In my opinion, this is an outstanding merit of an international academic meeting. Different motivations generate different perspectives, methodologies, and arguments. We will surely be able to learn from the discussions among us. I believe that through this exchange of different views and ideas, we can explore the frontiers of African Studies.

References

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