

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In June 2020, we continue our new tradition, the guest editorial. The *African Studies Review* has an enormous reach, and we seek to expand this audience by offering a podium for our editors and editorial board members to share some of their thoughts and concerns. I'm delighted this issue begins with a timely reflection on the greatest disruption in modern history, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and how it is affecting Africa, by our editor Dominika Koter.

COVID-19 & Africa

It is a truism that these are no ordinary times. What is most likely on everyone's mind is how our lives have been upended by a global pandemic and how nothing now seems normal. With classes moving online and conferences around the globe and Africa-based research travel canceled, we all would like for our lives to return to normal, and we hope that this is not *the new normal*. Ironically, when I agreed to write this editorial a few months back, I picked for my topic a phenomenon that I wanted to call the normalization of the study of African politics. With nothing appearing normal at the time of writing in March 2020—with the wave of shutdowns that already took hold in Europe and the U.S. beginning in some African countries—it seems almost perverse to float this idea. And yet, before COVID-19 took over our lives and our attention, something intriguing was happening in the study of African politics; political scientists were studying more and more topics and phenomena, such as parliamentary procedures or legislative activities of Members of parliament, that are indisputably important but seem almost mundane.

A couple of years ago I wrote an article about the changing professional background of deputies in the National Assembly in Benin and the ensuing consequences. While I was personally interested in this topic and its implications, I was convinced that few, other than my most curious colleagues, would share my interest. Much of the received wisdom portrayed African legislatures, as well as its MPs, as of relatively little importance. The study of

African Studies Review, Volume 63, Number 2 (June 2020), pp. 205–211

© Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association, 2020

doi:10.1017/asr.2020.52

African politics was dominated by much more captivating subjects, such as ethnic politics or clientelism, topics that I have also previously studied. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, in the last couple of years, many political scientists have embraced more vigorously the study of legislatures, MPs, and primaries and have placed an increased emphasis on formal rules of politics. Some of my colleagues began to collect data on MPs' attendance, their education, and lived experiences. Others have devoted efforts to collecting systematic data on various facets of African legislatures. In other words, our field started to focus more and more on the nitty gritty workings of parliamentary politics. It is this focus on the almost mundane that I see as part of the normalization of the study of African politics. Apart from dynamics that are *sui generis*, the field is more and more studying African politics the way that we study politics elsewhere. To be clear, this normalization is a matter of degrees. There were always scholars who worked against the grain, for example, studying the role of economic factors and retrospective voting, just as in established Western democracies, and not just ethnic or clientelist factors. The current focus is not entirely new, but the sheer number of scholars working on "the ordinary" seems higher than before. Importantly, this is probably not just an academic fad, but more likely a testament to overall changes in African politics.

While I cannot speak with authority about other disciplines, we can see, anecdotally, some signs of this interest in the mundane beyond the field of politics. Even recent coverage of Africa in the *New York Times* has diversified to some degree beyond terrorism and civil wars. A few months ago, Dionne Searcey described the struggles and resourcefulness of women left behind in Senegalese villages by husbands who had left for Europe. The subjects of the article were not helpless migrants, but strong and enterprising women who had the same preoccupations, despite their particular circumstances, as women all over the world—feeding their children, running households, and trying to get along with their in-laws. It was surprisingly refreshing to read about normal women dealing with normal emotions, alongside their anything but normal challenges.

The spreading pandemic will surely put this increasing interest in ordinary phenomena on hold, but it is worth pondering whether the trend that I outlined reflected something positive about our engagement with the continent. While, all of a sudden, COVID-19 forces us to think about the impact of diseases on our lives, it also reminds us of the role that disease, fear of mortality, and important medical breakthroughs have played in the history of Africa. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the prevalence of malaria and its corresponding high mortality for Europeans in some ways acted as a buffer for Africa, in that it limited Europeans' willingness and ability to venture much beyond the coast (with the exception of some intrepid, or foolhardy, explorers). While the portrayal of Africa as a "white man's grave" had a clearly negative connotation for Europeans at the time, it also offered parts of the continent some measure of protection by delaying European conquest. Of course, the eventual Scramble for Africa had many

causes, including the political dynamics in Europe itself, but the discovery of quinine prophylaxis, while an important medical advancement, undoubtedly facilitated European exploitation and the carving up of the continent.

Another aspect worth considering is the Ebola outbreak of 2014–16 and its legacy. The Ebola virus has cruelly attacked some of the weakest and most vulnerable states, with their capacity eroded by years of dictatorship (in Guinea) and civil war (in Sierra Leone and Liberia). The diverse responses to the Ebola crisis, including Ato Kwamena Onoma's essay in this issue [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.38>], showed, among other things, the importance of viable national healthcare systems (or the dangers associated with their absence) and not just ad hoc treatment of diseases through a patchwork of foreign NGOs. One of the common criticisms of foreign aid and NGO activities in Africa is their approach of picking and choosing different diseases to tackle without any attempt at coordination, instead of trying to buttress the overall healthcare system. Ebola laid bare the limitations of this approach, because in the three countries where the outbreak took place, it was very difficult to graft an effective response to the virus onto a very weak healthcare system. While to Western eyes almost all African healthcare systems seem weak, the Ebola epidemic showed that even small differences in state capacity gave certain states important advantages in fighting the virus. It is probably not a coincidence that states with better health resources, such as Senegal and Nigeria, were able to successfully quarantine Ebola cases in their respective territories. The difference between Senegalese and Guinean state capacity gave Senegal better tools and a much better shot at preventing the spread of disease.

What will be the implications or lessons of our encounter with COVID-19? It is too early to understand long term consequences, but some effects feel immediate. Many of us in academia who took our mobility for granted, with the ability to zoom back and forth between different continents, are now humbled by our own vulnerability and the disruption of our lifestyles. While we are frustrated by our current immobility, it is a good time to ponder the routine restrictions on travel, such as difficulties of obtaining visas, that African academics experience on an ongoing basis.

We still do not know how widely the novel coronavirus will spread in Africa, but some of the leading mitigation strategies will encounter particular hurdles on the continent. In my second week of social distancing in suburban upstate New York, I have been thinking how much more difficult keeping distance from others will be in Dakar's *quartiers populaires*, the slums of Kibera or Korogocho (explored in Magdalena Chulek's contribution in this issue [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.46>]), or Accra's informal settlements, where population density is particularly high, and how contrary it is to the vibrant communal lifestyle of those urban spaces. Large households and compounds populated by extended family do not lend themselves easily to social distancing, and they pose particular risks for inter-generational transmission of the virus.

President Trump's racialized rhetoric surrounding the coronavirus, or what he insensitively refers to as the "Chinese virus," probably has many Africans exhaling a collective sigh of relief that the virus did not originate on their continent. While the "even Africa has COVID-19" paradigm is problematic enough, I dread to think how damaging it would be to have to defend the continent from the stigma of an "African virus."

It is also worth thinking about the economic impact of this virus on the continent, including its effect on aid flows. Given the financial strains that the pandemic will inevitably put on Western countries, will aid be one of the first areas where cuts will be made? Or, will the shortage of ventilators in rich countries draw attention to their much more extreme scarcity in most Africa countries? Will the response to the coronavirus highlight the plight of people suffering from other respiratory illnesses, such as tuberculosis, or will it divert funds from fighting other deadly diseases?

The widespread disruptions to our daily lives have united us across different continents in a collective yearning for a return to normalcy. Yet, it is unclear to what degree we will go back to where we left off before the pandemic. COVID-19 will most likely change academia and shape what we study. Some of the topics that I outlined as gaining interest before the outbreak of the coronavirus might lose prominence. While I saw the focus on the ordinary as a positive sign in the study of African politics, perhaps it will seem once again as too mundane. The pandemic might create new lines of inquiry, such as its effect on the level of democracy or even regime type, when governments use emergency powers to expand their authority. For better or worse, diseases have shaped the history and politics of Africa, and COVID-19 is likely to leave a profound mark on the continent, on our scholarship, and on our profession.

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The June 2020 issue of *African Studies Review* presents exciting new research from across the continent, with particular attention to Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, and Zimbabwe. This latest issue is brimming with engaging disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship, from history, anthropology, art history, political science, poetry and literary criticism, visual ethnography, and memory studies, and involves a truly global assemblage of contributors from Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Portugal, China, Ghana, Poland, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We are very pleased to publish an original essay by former Guantánamo detainee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.22>], and a mini-forum reflecting on the significance of his astonishing memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*, for African studies [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.39>]. A sequence of four commentaries contextualizes the place of Mauritania in African studies, the abuses of authoritarian African governments, the history of Mauritania prior to and since September 11, 2001, the place of Africa and Africans within global counterterrorism operations, and how to read and teach Slahi's work alongside the vast corpus of African prison diaries. We are also pleased to bring you a number of stimulating contemplations on new books and films, including a review essay by Emmanuel Akyeampong [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.86>] on current scholarship on music and performance in Ghana.

We open this issue with a pair of articles by promising new voices in African Studies.

The Chinese scholar Shaonan Liu, a recent graduate of Michigan State University's prestigious program in African history, is the recipient of the 2018 ASA Graduate Student Paper Prize. In "Symbol of Wealth and Prestige: A Social History of Chinese-made Enamelware in Northern Nigeria" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.15>] Liu, now a Professor of History at Beijing Normal University, explores the domination of Chinese enamelware in the homes, markets, and restaurants of northern Nigeria. Enamelware was initially imported from China by European trading firms, and subsequently manufactured in Nigeria by Chinese-owned factories. Liu highlights the "modern" advantages of the enamelware and the process of market integration into local socio-cultural networks of meaning, to the point where today it is an essential component of Hausa bridewealth.

Susanna L. Sacks's "Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag as Tactical Lyric: The Role of Digital Speech in Imagining a Networked Zimbabwean Nation" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.44>] received Honorable Mention in the 2018 ASA Graduate Student Paper prize. "This Flag" is a digital poetry performance which first appeared on Facebook in April 2016. Shared widely and swiftly, it soon became a rallying cry for Zimbabweans around the world protesting the policies of then-president Robert Mugabe. Mawarire's video embodies a poetics of anti-colonial resistance and nationalization, creating rhetorical links between digital organizing and grounded action.

The next pair of articles offers a fascinating investigation into contemporary debates about history and memory between colonies and metropolises.

Elemine Ould Mohamed Baba and Francisco Freire provide a fascinating investigation into how a recent controversy around the Battle of Um Tounsi and Mauritania's colonial past more generally ruptures along political and social lines. In "Looters vs. Traitors: The *Muqawama* ('Resistance') Narrative, and its Detractors, in Contemporary Mauritania" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.37>], the authors find that unprecedented new levels of media freedom have propagated colonial apologist undercurrents, revealing almost century-old cleavages surrounding resistance and collaboration with French colonial violence.

From a different angle, Kayum Ahmed's essay "#RhodesMustFall: How a Decolonial Student Movement in the Global South Inspired Epistemic Disobedience at the University of Oxford" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.49>] examines the proliferation of student-led decolonizing movements from South Africa and beyond, to the hallowed halls of Britain's elite universities. From interviews with various actors involved in various branches of the #RhodesMustFall movements, Ahmed reveals the epistemic challenges of contemporary debates about the colonial past.

The next essay returns us to post-colonial Nigeria and the expansion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in modern Africa. In "The Celestial City: 'Mormonism' and American Identity in Post-Independence Nigeria" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.21>], Russell W. Stevenson reveals how the Salt Lake City-based church transitioned its operations in Africa from individuated agents of religious exchange to a global corporate religiosity. Whereas the first adherents viewed Mormonism as a mechanism for economic uplift, in more recent decades the American-based faith has been "translated" to engage new generations of Nigerian adherents.

The next pair of articles explores urban life, slums, and identity formation. In fascinatingly rich garbology ethnography, entitled "Hustling the *mtaa* way: the Brain Work of the Garbage Business in Nairobi's Slums" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.46>], Magdalena Chulek explores the creative strategies of Kenyan slum dwellers. Trash pickers have developed a finely-tuned infrastructure that governs action and simultaneously allows room for expansion and inclusivity. The "brain work" of hustlers, rooted in their network of relationships and their capacity to improvise, facilitates a sense of autonomy and agency in the face of endless economic adversity.

Ato Kwamena Onoma's essay "Xenophobia's Contours During an Ebola Epidemic: Proximity and the Targeting of Peul Migrants in Senegal" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.38>] reveals the effect of geographical proximity on Ebola-era xenophobic outbursts targeting the Peul population of the West African nation. Onoma highlights how epidemics structure the xenophobic micro-dynamics during public health emergencies, underscoring the divide between native Senegalese and those they perceive as Guinean foreigners and reinforcing long-persisting patterns of exclusion. The conclusion is that the contours of xenophobia in contexts marked by public health crises and in those situations in which issues of public health do not constitute a major concern tend to mirror each other.

Our final essay, by Kate Skinner, takes us deep into the historical archives of colonial and post-colonial Togo. In “West Africa’s First Coup: Neo-Colonial and Pan-African Projects in Togo’s ‘Shadow Archives’” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.39>], Skinner reconsiders three competing explanations of the 1963 assassination of Sylvanus Olympio, the first President of the Republic of Togo. Skinner is interested in what she calls Togo’s “shadow archives,” a disparate assemblage of mostly diplomatic documentation flung far and wide in Europe, North America, and Africa, and how each of the three explanations resonated with particular people at particular moments in history. Her new interpretation of West Africa’s first coup may not answer the question definitively, but it offers a rubric for future study questions pertaining to national sovereignty, neo-colonialism, and pan-African solidarity in postcolonial Africa.

The editors would like to dedicate this issue to our dear friend and Editorial Review Board member Tejumola “Teju” Olaniyan, who passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in November at the age of sixty, shortly after attending the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association. Teju was the Louise Durham Mead Professor of English and Wole Soyinka Professor of the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He was an internationally celebrated scholar of African, African American, and Caribbean literatures, post-colonial and popular culture studies, and author and editor of many books, including one reviewed in this issue [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.33>]. His most celebrated work is perhaps his monograph, *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (2004), widely recognized as a superlative interdisciplinary study of modern African popular music. His most recent monograph, entitled *Taking African Cartoons Seriously: Politics, Satire, and Culture*, which appeared in 2018, examined the rich diversity of cartooning across Africa and highlights issues facing African cartoonists today, such as sociopolitical trends, censorship, and use of new technologies. In Madison, Teju served as the Chair of the African Cultural Studies department and in a number of other distinguished capacities. He served as President of the African Literature Association from 2013 to 2014, recently assuming the role of Editor-in-Chief of the revamped *Journal of the African Literature Association*. He was tremendously active in the African Studies Association. In addition to his invaluable service to the ASR, he served on our Board of Directors from 2012 to 2015 and as program co-chair of the 2012 ASA Annual Meeting. Teju was an intellectual giant, a master facilitator, a gentle mentor, a curious critic, a thoughtful interlocutor, an encouraging leader, and a loving husband and father. He will be forever treasured by the thousands he taught, the hundreds who called him colleague and teacher, and the countless many who considered him a friend. Teju is survived by his wife, Mojisola, assistant dean and director of academic enhancement at UW–Madison Law School, and his children Bolajoko and Olabimpe.

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