

Editorial

Dear reader

Today is 6 December 2012, exactly one month after Barack Obama was re-elected as president of the United States of America. What a glorious day it was! Because no matter how poor the economy is doing in the US, no matter how many 2008 promises remained unfulfilled, and no matter how much Obama's ideas have moved towards the right of the political spectrum as a result of unavoidable compromises with the Republican Party, for the majority of people in the world it does matter that the most powerful man in the world is a person of colour. This is of huge symbolic value to the African-American people, who hope – whether justified or not – that Obama will be able to identify closely with the discrimination and hardships they are still facing in present-day America. Obama's presidency is also tremendously important for the growing group of people of mixed descent, a group that is the product of globalisation and that sees in the person of Obama the augur of an irreversible trend: growing numbers of mixed people all over the world, and across all social and cultural layers of society. Finally, the re-election of Obama is, of course, an occasion to celebrate amongst Africans, both in Africa and in the African diaspora. Being the son of an American mother and a Kenyan father, Obama has a much closer link with the African continent than the majority of African-Americans.

Except for the symbolic significance, however, it is rather unlikely that Obama's personal link with Africa will have a big impact on US policy towards Africa. As aptly explained by Karen Del Biondo (see the Reports section of this issue), foreign policies towards Africa – EU policy, but also US policy – are usually determined by a mixture of normative objectives (a concern for democracy, stability and development), self-interest, and the question of effectiveness. During his first term, Obama did intervene in Africa, although most of these operations were of a military nature and thus tended to be classified as belonging to the “twenty-first century scramble for Africa”. Under the NATO-flag the US fought in Libya (March 2011), thus supporting the anti-Gadafi opposition. Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti still serves as the only official military base on the continent, although AFRICOM (the US African Command) admitted that there are also other locations in Africa where the US has a military presence (Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia). In October 2011 the US sent a special force to Uganda in order to help trace Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. It seems as if Obama's operations in Africa have in fact accelerated as the US is now directly involved in military operations against a large number of regional enemies – ranging from the Horn of Africa, over the Congo en Uganda, to Nigeria and Mali (see the article by investigative journalist Nick Turse in July 2012 – <http://www.tomdispatch.com/>). Along the same lines, John Norris, the director of the Sustainable Security programme at the Center for American Progress

(<http://www.americanprogress.org/>), claimed that the Pentagon is increasingly active in Africa. However, despite this military interest in Africa, the new Africa policy, as released by the Obama administration in June of this year, did not mention any of the new developments that are currently taking place in Africa. Other than stressing the need for peace and stability, for economic growth and for democracy, this new Africa policy seemed to ignore the fact that Africa is truly transforming on an economic and political level – and it has not yet developed a plan on how to truly assist Africa with these new challenges.

It is thus very likely that during Obama's second term the Africa policy of the US will continue to be guided by self-interest – mainly maintaining security and safeguarding commercial interests. Unfortunately, this seems to be the approach taken by most powers in the world, be it the US or the EU, China, or India. This is a pity, or even a missed opportunity, as there are many instances where the West (including India and China) could truly assist Africa on its – own, self-determined – road to progress and development.

This special issue of *Afrika Focus* is called “(r)Urban Africa: multidisciplinary approaches to the African city”. It contains a number of articles that were presented at GAPSVM5, the fifth symposium of the Africa Platform of the Ghent University Association, on 2 December 2011. In all four articles in this issue the reader is introduced to a unique aspect of African culture. These are cultural elements or developments the West should be made aware of, they could be promoted and supported by the West, and they could even be enriching for external powers. In his article “The Ogaden War: Somali women's roles” Van Hauwermeiren tries to refute the stereotypical role the West tends to attribute to African women. During the 1977 Ogaden War, both Somali and Ogadeni women were active in the war, thus presenting a different image of gender roles in the Horn of Africa. Van Hauwermeiren stresses that women participated in the war of their own free will, and that they were respected for what they did. This article illustrates that the role of women in African societies is often much stronger than expected. It is especially women who testify to dynamism, resilience and flexibility, and this also in African cultures usually associated with very stereotypical gender roles. This is one of the African strengths the West should try to tap into and help to develop. Brinkman's article – “Town, village and bush: war and cultural landscapes in south-eastern Angola (1966-2002)” – also talks about a war situation, more particularly about the opposition between ‘town’ and ‘bush’ during the war in Angola, and how this opposition altered perceptions and could eventually have lethal consequences. The fact that the terms ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ received a very particular, but rapidly changing significance is illustrative of a society that wants to start appropriating reality to its own needs, rather than having its reality determined by post-colonial imaginations. In Mpofu's article – “Perpetual ‘Outcasts’? Squatters in peri-urban Bulawayo, Zimbabwe” – the reader is introduced to a typical urban African phenomenon: the township dweller. The author stresses that squatter camps are often informal, but well-organized societies that should qualify as ‘cities inside the city’. These squatter camps are dynamic structures in which citizenship and local identity are

forged – they are another vibrant element of contemporary Africa, to which local governments and Western agencies should pay much more attention. Finally, Batibonak also describes a distinctive African phenomenon in her article “Sorcellerie en milieu urbain amplifiée par les pentecôtismes camerounais”. This article deals with the way in which witchcraft was transformed when it was introduced into modern city life. In the context of Cameroon, witchcraft has thus been reconstructed by Pentecostal preachers in order to find an answer to socio-economic urban challenges. Also in this case, a fundamental African concept is transformed and re-invented, in a manner that attests to an enormous capacity for flexibility and vitality.

The strength of women, the re-appropriation of current-day realities, the dynamics of new and informal social structures, and the flexibility of traditional values are all unique elements of African society, but these elements rarely attract attention, as they do not match the merely economic or security-oriented interests in Africa.

In finishing, we would like to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that this issue of Afrika Focus also contains a large number of reports, most of which are extensive reports of doctoral research. These reports provide an interesting overview of the research that is being carried out in and on Africa and they testify to the fact that Africa is indeed a valuable research site, with highly competent researchers and research institutes.

Finally, Afrika Focus is proud of its status as an internationally recognized, peer-reviewed and open access journal. In the near future, we hope to be indexed in the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS) and in the Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge, as we know that these lists are still the only ones accepted in a number of scientific domains.

We hope that you will enjoy this issue and that these articles, together with the reelection of President Obama, will put you in an optimistic mood with regard to Africa’s future.

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