Understanding Contemporary Africa in Australia and New Zealand: Reflections on the African Continent.

Tanya Lyons, AFSAAP President and Flinders University *

ABSTRACT

Is Africa a country or a continent? This is not an unwarranted question, as there are many assumptions that Africa is just 'one place' – affected by the same social, political and economic forces. However, the 'modern' history of Africa has been well documented by historians and social scientists.[1] Thematically these texts have fallen neatly into the discourse of African Studies, which although has had its origins in the colonial project, it has gone through a variety of changes and challenges to these perspectives since the 1960s, including receiving insights from postcolonial, feminist and postmodern theories. Yet, despite this academic knowledge about 'Africa' the concept remains elusive, particularly in Australia. How can we understand 'Africa' in this region – and its trends and transformations in light of the historically Eurocentric and American dominated field of African Studies?

Introduction

Africa has been imagined by the west as the 'Heart of Darkness' ever since Joseph Conrad depicted this bleak view in his 1899 novel of the same name. Conrad's character Kurtz's depiction of the "horror, the horror" has thus remained etched in the international psyche as of undeniably African origin. These images of 'darkness' and 'horror' are regularly reinforced by the media's fascination with

---

*tanya.lyons@flinders.edu.au
[1] see for example Richard Reid (2012) *A History of Modern Africa 1800 to the Present*, 2nd edition, Wiley-Blackwell, UK; April and Donald Gordon (eds) (2001) *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder; Alex Thomson (2000) An Introduction to African Politics, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London and New York; Naomi Chazan et al, (1999) *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder.

representations of the regular violence that occurs during civil wars and conflicts, all too commonly reported 'out of Africa'.[2] Yet, relying upon these historical and contemporary 'images of Africa' as sourced via the popular media or classic literature, results in a very limited understanding of what Africa *is*.

What is Africa? This is not an unwarranted question in Australia, because there are many assumptions that Africa is just 'one place' – and very little awareness that it is a continent with many different countries (not helped by the fact that the actual number of countries varies depending on *when* you are asking. For example, in 1994 there were 53 nations until South Sudan became the world's newest nation in 2011, after a long and bloody civil war, and ultimate secession via referendum, creating 54 states, but debatably 55 if we include the Arab Democratic Republic of Saharawi [or Western Sahara] which has demanded its independence, but remains somewhat thwarted by Morocco's claims over statehood). There are also many other assumptions that the idea of 'Africa - as one place' - is affected by the same social, political and economic forces, with the same social, political and economic outcomes.

It is at this juncture that the distinction between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa becomes relevant, because the foreign policy formulations of the former colonisers and other states, assume this divide – this line in the sand – when describing and analyzing 'Africa'. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Djibouti and Egypt, all located geographically north of the Sahara Desert are more often than not, described, analysed and connected within Middle Eastern politics and relations (of course there are other obvious historical, political, economic, cultural and religious reasons for this). This region thus now attracts its own acronym – MENA - the Middle East and North Africa. This has allowed Sub-Saharan African states, located south of the Sahara Desert, to attract their own and other generalisations, foreign policy agendas, and regional distinctions such as Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa and the Horn of Africa, all of which are not considered 'the Middle East'. However any examination of contemporary 'Africa' must acknowledge and include all of these regions together within their politically defined borders. While this is clearly challenging to International Relations theorists,[3] it is necessary because of the interconnections and issues that transgress the entire continent.

---

[2] See Cirino Hiteng Ofuho, "The changing Images of a continent: An eclectic survey of Writings on Africa in the international system", in *Global Society*, Vol 17, no.2, 2003, pp. 151-164.

[3] See Ulf Engel and Gorm Rye Olsen, *Africa and the North: between Globalization and Marginalization*, Routledge, London, 2005.

However we define Africa then, it can be argued that in general there is a lack of awareness and understanding about the history and political intricacies of this continent, and this dearth of knowledge globally, limits the potential development of African countries in a globalized world. Why is this so, when the 'modern' history and politics of Africa *has* been well documented by historians and social scientists?[4] Thematically their texts have fitted neatly into the discourse of *African Studies*. With its origins in the 'colonial project', African Studies has since gone through a myriad of changes and transformations, including receiving insights from postcolonial, feminist and postmodern theories, and more recently from the 'decolonial' perspective, which calls for a new 'decolonization' to occur across Africa, encompassing the desire for Africa and other postcolonial states to be rid of all of the baggage inherited at independence (the colonial hang-over), and the associated neo-colonial legacy.[5]

Furthermore, whether dominated by anthropology, history, politics or sociology - African Studies (outside of Africa) remains a predominately Eurocentric and American 'Field of Study'.[6] Thus, for Australian and New Zealand based academics and researchers, this means operating from the margins of this discourse, with smaller audiences for their ideas; a lot of competition for access to the limited publishing opportunities in the so-called "A ranked" journals;[7] even fewer opportunities to engage in academic teaching about Africa; let alone

---

[4] see for example Richard Reid (2012) *A History of Modern Africa 1800 to the Present*, 2nd edition, Wiley-Blackwell, UK; April and Donald Gordon (eds) (2001) *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder; Alex Thomson (2000) An Introduction to African Politics, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London and New York; Naomi Chazan et al, (1999) *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder.

[5] See for example Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013). *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* Berghahn Books, New York, NY; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni "Coloniality of Power in Development Studies and the Impact of Global Imperial Designs on Africa", *Australasian Review of African Studies Volume* 33 Number 2, 2012, pp. 48-73

[6] See for example Tanya Lyons and Elizabeth Dimock, *The State of African Studies in Australia*,", in Paul Zeleza (ed*) The Study of Africa Volume 2, Global and Transnational Engagements*, CODESRIA. 2007; Stephen Feierman, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History," Robert Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds. *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993; V. Y. Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Impact of African Studies on Philosophy," Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds. *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 113-138; Naomi Chazan (1999).

[7] Tanya Lyons, "Journal Rankings and the Australasian Review of African Studies, in *AFSAAP News*, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/03/journal-rankings-and-the-australasian-review-of-african-studies/

opportunities for students to thus study Africa, which I have previously lamented about.[8]

This is why the *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific* (AFSAAP) is such an important association in this region. Not only to bring researchers together at its annual conference, but to publish their research in its journal the *Australasian Review of African Studies*. Although, we need to acknowledge that more Africans need to become involved in the leadership team and executive of this association. Potentially and hopefully, as we see increases in the numbers of African-Australians rising in the university sector, we should also see corresponding changes to the make-up of the association's executive and membership.

Understanding Africa's contradictions

In 1994 two separate events in two different African nations demonstrated the contradictions and vast differences across the continent, making it hard to comprehend Africa 'as one place'. Firstly, in April 1994 South Africans celebrated the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new democracy and the 'rainbow nation' led by one of the most respected of African leaders, the late Nelson Mandela. However, at the same time, the small central African nation of Rwanda erupted into genocidal violence, during an unprecedented civil war, that the international community failed to both comprehend and prevent. This 'heart of darkness' overshadowed the successes of the global anti-apartheid movement, and created a pessimism and long standing incomprehensibility about Africa.

Twenty years on, similar contradictions continue to thwart our understanding of Africa.

For example, in 2014 Nigeria was being heralded as one of the world's fastest growing economies, with a celebrated 'Nollywood' movie industry. Yet, Boko Haram militants operating in the North East of this country were undermining the state's authority with extremist violence linked to Islamic fundamentalism, and

---

[8] Tanya Lyons, "Education in Australia's Relationship With Africa", in David Mickler and Tanya Lyons (eds) New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Toward Africa, Melbourne University Press, 2013 (pp. 193-223).

threatening regional and global security.[9] This threat continues today, and unfortunately cannot be solved by such well-meaning globalized social media campaigns, such as the #BringBackOurGirls twitter feed, and associated Facebook site.[10]

Therefore, while it may be obvious to 'Africanists' (or those that study Africa within the academy), that 'Africa' is not just *one place*, and each country has its own history, future, challenges and contradictions, this may not be as obvious to the casual observer. To more accurately define Africa those interested in doing so should or could certainly engage in some historical research which would involve the following:

a) go back to our pre-history to the origins of the human species, which archaeologists (and the *Chemical Brothers*) declare "began in Africa!"[11]

b) discuss the etymology of the name 'Africa' (*Africa Terra* – land of the *Afri*) and ask how it gained so much traction since it was first apparently used by the ancient Romans to describe some northern parts of the continent.

c) investigate the first Chinese silk maps made of the continent dating back to 1389, made "more than 100 years before western explorers and map-makers reached the continent".[12]

d) skip forward through 400 years of history and examine the impact of the slave trade which saw millions of 'Africans' forcibly bought and sold and exported across the Atlantic, decimating the populations across the continent, and sealing its fate for the next phase of violence – Colonisation.

e) focus on the all-important 1884-5 Berlin Conference, which saw the 'scramble for Africa' – rather, the carving up of the continent among the Europeans powers vying for land and resources for the expansion of their empires, in the name of 'civilisation', and which settled these colonial and artificial boundaries among all stakeholders, apart from Africans themselves.

---

[9] Daniel Agbiboa, Nigerian State Responses to Insurgency, in John Idriss Lahai and Tanya Lyons (Eds), *African Frontiers: Insurgency, Governance and Peacebuilding in Postcolonial States*, Ashgate, London, 2015; Mohammed Sulemana and Govand Azeez, "Rethinking Islamism in Western Africa", *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Vol 36: No.1, June 2015, pp. 51-67; Mohammed Sulemana, "Centenary of failure? Boko Haram, Jihad and the Nigerian reality", in Australasian Review of African Studies, Vol 35: No. 2, December 2014, pp. 69-87.

[10] See https://twitter.com/BBOG_Nigeria?lang=en, and https://www.facebook.com/bringbackourgirls (accessed 21 October 2015)

[11] Tim White, "Human Origins: It Began in Africa", *New Scientist*, Vol 208, Issue, 2785, doi:10.1016/S0262-4079(10)62762-5; and see The Chemical Brothers, *It Began in Afrika*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRC7zKfKomc.

[12] Alasdair Leithead, "Africa's oldest map unveiled", BBC News World Edition, 12th November 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2446907.stm

    f) examine the subsequent colonisation of the continent, which although spanned only 60 to 80 years, has arguably had the most significant and wide ranging effect on the continent; and,

    g) investigate the post-colonial legacies including the imposition of arbitrary political boundaries cutting through ethnic groups and communities, carving out states where 'nations did not exist.'

However, for the purposes here, I will leave steps A-D above for further research and researchers, and instead focus on E-G, and look at the impact of colonization due to its significant impact upon the continent. Ultimately however, I will argue that this factor can no longer be blamed for Africa's contemporary woes. The sentiment of this exercise is inspired by the 1890 speech given by then British Prime Minister, Robert Gascoyne-Cecil (the Third Marquis of Salisbury, and yes, they also named the capital of colonial Rhodesia after him), where he noted the main feature of the colonial project – the creation of (artificial) political boundaries - with some irony. Given that his oft quoted speech has been overly paraphrased, poorly cited and reinterpreted awkwardly over the last 125 years (more-so since the advent of Google and Wikipedia), his original words as reported by *The Times*, on August 7th 1890, are quoted in full below, in the context of the venue and occasion for their original utterance.

Speaking to his Ministers at a banquet at the Mansion House, on the 7th August 1890, the Prime Minister stated:

> "Perhaps it is that very peacefulness of current affairs in Europe that has removed Europe almost entirely from the ken of those interested in foreign affairs. We think of Africa and of nothing else, not because I think Africa has become more interesting, but because Europe has become less interesting. But I am not surprised at the attention which has been given to the great and splendid discoveries of our explorers, and the explorers of other nations, and the development of industry and enterprise which has taken place in that vast and long neglected continent. Yet I believe that the deep interest which has been felt by political men in recent negotiations in Africa has not been entirely due to a hope that those vast unexplored regions would yield early and abundant fruit to the enterprise of the merchant, or the discover, or the colonist. I rather should be inclined to cite the deep interest that has been felt in Africa as another proof of the strong pacific feeling which is gradually gaining more and more undisputed influence over all the strongest and most ruling intellectuals in the world. Men have

welcomed the agreements which we have made, or which we are making, with the principle nations of the world in regard to Africa, partly no doubt on account of the great field which is opened to English industry and enterprise, but much more, I believe, because they recognize that in those agreements we are removing the most probably and the most dangerous cause of possible quarrel between nations who ought always to be at peace. (Cheers.) **We have been engaged in what, perhaps, to a satirist may seem the somewhat unprofitable task of drawing lines upon maps where no human foot has ever trod. We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, but we have only been hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where those mountains and rivers and lakes were**." (emphasis added)[13]

What is interesting about this speech is that the Prime Minister clearly sees Africa as part of the future of his empire, and justifies the colonization and carving up of the continent, on the grounds that it would avoid wars between other European nations vying for its resources. This European colonisation was clearly racist in its mandate, as he made no mention of the peoples residing within Africa, clearly negating them as human, and seemed to think it somewhat amusing that the political boundaries were being marked out without knowing where they were. Furthermore, clearly he did not have any care or understanding of the negative impact that colonialism would have in these newly carved out states.

Had he have had any foresight or care, could he have imagined the end of colonization – and the decolonial period - as the 'winds of change' swept through the continent in the 1950s and 1960s?

What would this British Prime Minister have made of postcolonial Africa with its violent civil wars, ethnic genocides and religious conflicts, persistent military coups, massive political corruption, ongoing poverty and underdevelopment? There is no doubt that such 'men' would have blamed the 'locals' (the indigenous political elite) for not implementing independence properly, for not allowing the logic of capitalism to thrive, and thus for not showing good leadership. Ironically, the 'locals' have maintained that the blame for Africa's woes lays squarely on the shoulders of men like this - the colonizers.

---

[13] Speech by Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, the 3rd Marquis of Salisbury and British Prime Minister, as reported in "The Mansion House Banquet to her Majesty's Ministers", *The Times,* 7 August 1890, p. 6.

However, how useful is it to keep blaming the colonizers for the many contemporary problems experienced across the African continent?

These problems can be seen most profoundly by the movement of people, through trade and other relations, but importantly through those forced to flee their homes due to civil wars and human insecurity, thus becoming refugees or internally displaced peoples. Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea have remained among the top 10 source countries for refugees since 2010.[14] Images of overloaded boats heading north from the continent, hoping to reach the southern tips of Europe have become common-place. Sadly, the reports of many of these attempts being made in unseaworthy boats, commissioned by ruthless people smugglers, trading on human misery and resulting in hundreds of deaths at sea, are also commonplace.[15] Getting 'Out of Africa' is now a survival strategy for thousands of individuals otherwise trapped in a cycle of civil wars and poverty. This is not an issue caused by or affecting one state only, and cannot be solely blamed on former colonial rulers.

When the independent African states began to 'fall apart', firstly from their colonial heritage, secondly through the mismanagement and misrule of corrupt or simply bad leaders, thirdly constrained by the politics of the Cold War, fourthly restricted by their physical environments and / or economies and trading relationships (including many landlocked countries with no natural resources), fifthly suffering under the burdens of the foreign debt crisis - which then sixthly led to the disasters of the economic structural adjustment programs imposed by the International financial institutions: it is curious that 'colonialism' the first on this long list of contributing factors, is usually blamed as the 'logical cause' of these African woes, and thus remains a convenient scapegoat for all of postcolonial Africa's problems – and thus obfuscating other causes more directly linked to the postcolonial state.

That is, when the postcolonial African state emerged, and through postcolonial theories, challenges were made to western discourses of Africa's past, present and future,[16] it was obvious that colonization was the culprit. Yet, more than half a century later we must consider that Africa is no longer beholden to the colonial state, and hasn't been for a long time, and that simply blaming the colonizers for

---

[14] See UNHCR (2014) *War's Human Cost: Global Trends 2013*, Report at http://www.unhcr.org/5399a14f9.html
[15] Bruce Loudon, (2015)"Sea of Chaos and despair for African Refugees", in *The Australian* – 21 April 2015 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/sea-of-chaos-and-despair-for-african-refugees/story-e6frg6z6-1227312518392
[16] See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin 1978

all of the problems facing Africa today, no longer has that much traction in International Relations theory.[17]

It is a continental wide issue and requires a solution of similar magnitude. The international relations and connections within the continent are between *all* African states, and therefore the African Union needs to be that solution.[18]

International Interventions and Civil Wars in Africa

Nonetheless, since the end of colonization, there have been countless 'international interventions' into African crises, either in the name of humanitarianism, or international security, and even because of neo-colonial tendencies that hinge upon former and ongoing trade and other related connections. Yet, many of the problems across Africa's 55 countries remain.

The first few decades of independence showed fewer success stories, with the development trajectory of most African countries marred by the debt crisis and structural adjustment programs of the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, the number and intensity of civil wars only increased, in part due to the implications and politics of the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold-War left African states vulnerable to global market forces, and African dictators susceptible to decline.[19] The aid and financial support propping up African 'dictatorships' and authoritarian regimes and states, aimed directly at supporting the geo-political agendas of either the USSR and/or the USA, was stopped. There was no need to continue supporting these countries with direct or indirect aid, because the threat of communism was clearly over, leaving the liberal international capitalist system in charge of Africa's fate. The only beneficiaries were those who could capitalize on the massive amounts of redundant small arms and weapons from the former Soviet states, ready to be sold to any African governments or rebel groups - anyone with the cash or diamonds to pay for them.

Thus in the early 1990s when famine occurred in Somalia, a US led United Nations' international intervention with an humanitarian agenda, unsurprisingly

---

[17] See Ulf Engel and Gorm Rye Olsen, *Africa and the North: between Globalization and Marginalization*, Routledge, London, 2005; and Tim Murithi (Ed), *Handbook of Africa's International Relations*, Routledge, London, 2014.

[18] See Ademola Abass and Dominique Mystris, "The African Union Legal Framework for protecting Asylum Seekers" (pp. 19-44), in Ademola Abass and Francesca Ippolito (Eds.), *Regional Approaches to the Protection of Aslyum Seekers: An International Legal Persepctive*, Ashgate, England/USA, 2014, p. 31.

[19] Alec Russell, *Big Men: Little People: Encounters in Africa*, London, MacMillan, 1999.

ended in disaster. US and UN troops were attacked with these left over Cold-War weapons, and the international community could not understand the hostility of the 'locals' to this 'help'. Without any resolution to the causes of the famine, and perhaps with even more tension among the warring clan factions in this country, US and UN troops were ultimately and hastily withdrawn. Somalia remains a failed state today and its people continue to be vulnerable to general 'insecurity'.[20] Many African states dependent on the export of cash-crops suffered rapid economic decline. For example, when the global price for coffee crashed in the early 1990s a number of African economies, especially Rwanda, lost much of their foreign earnings. In Rwanda, this contributed to rapid economic decline, rising levels of poverty and high unemployment, among the other conditions necessary for a civil war to escalate into genocide.[21]

Other civil wars raged across the continent, many of them classified as 'resource conflicts', they were noteworthy in particular due to the number and use of child soldiers, and the violence perpetrated against civilians[22]. The decade long civil wars in the West African states of Sierra Leone and Liberia are infamous for their use and abuse of child soldiers, and they remain the notorious examples of civil-wars fuelled by 'conflict diamonds'. Shocking images of children, either holding guns, or with their limbs hacked off, consolidated the long held view that indeed Africa was the 'dark continent' that could not be comprehended.

When in 1997 Zaire's long serving dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, was ousted in a military coup led by Laurent Kabila, the newly renamed nation - Democratic Republic of the Congo – began a long and brutal path to its current future. Known as Africa's 'First World War', Kabila managed to involve every neighbouring country in his embattled state – Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad and Namibia all sent troops in - to either support Kabila's maintenance of power, or support those undermining his authority. Unashamedly these partners in war were promised access to the DRCs vast mineral and logging resources in exchange for their support. It was no surprise that Kabila was later assassinated by one of his body guards in 2001. His son Joseph Kabila took on the Presidency and

---

[20] John Idriss Lahai and Tanya Lyons, "Armed Insurgency in Somalia and the Dilemma of Projecting a Liberal Agenda for Peace" (TBA in process); Nikola Pijovic, "It is Chaotic But Not Chaos": Civil society, Local Governance and the Construction of Political Order In and Around Mogadishu, Australasian Review of African Studies Volume 33 Number 2, 2012, pp. 29-47; Emily Bienvenue, The Safeguarding of International Shipping: A Solution to Somali Piracy? *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Volume 31 Number 2 2010, pp.30-50.
[21] Linda Melvern, *A people betrayed: The role of the west in Rwanda's genocide*, Zed Books, 2000; Colin Cameron, "Remembering Rwanda" in Lyons and Pye (eds) (2006) *Africa on a Global Stage*, Africa World Press, New Jersey
[22] See Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone,* Oxford, James Currey, 1996; Reno, William, *Warlord Politics and African States*, Lynne Reinner, Colorado, 1999.

remains in power today, democratically elected, and yet still without full control of the entire country.

Uganda's infamous Lord's Resistance Army was also operational throughout the 1990s and remains a threat today in the border regions of Uganda, in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.[23]   This legacy of an unresolved postcolonial civil war highlights the existence of pockets of failure within otherwise well established states.

It was not until the 1998 Al Qaeda-linked terrorist attacks on the American embassies in both Kenya and Tanzania, that the international community realized that what happens in Africa can affect the rest of the world, and that more attention and understanding was required. International interventions in Africa now had a clear global security agenda,[24] but still required an humanitarian goal. However, what this resulted in was the reinforcement of a negative image of Africa – a place to be pessimistic about – from the 'bread basket' to the 'basket case'. Ironically it was Robert Kaplan in his now infamous 1994 article *The Coming Anarchy*[25] who argued that - "we ignore this dying region at our own risk"!

Afro-Pessimism and Afro-Optimism

For too long an Afro-Pessimism perspective had thus dominated the study and analysis of Africa. Indeed Gavin Kitching infamously "Gave up African Studies" at the 2000 Annual Conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific, held in Adelaide, because he was too 'depressed' and disappointed by the post-colonial liberation leaders, the same ones he had supported in their battles for independence, his faith in them had been misplaced, and they had ruined their countries through corruption and cronyism. His subsequent article first published in *ARAS,* sparked an international debate on the merits of continuing with African studies,[26] and gained him some notoriety.

---

[23] See Doom, R., & Vlassenroot, K. (1999). Kony's Message: A New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. *African Affairs, 98*(390), 5-36; Vinci, A. (2005). The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army. *Small Wars & Insurgencies, 16*(3), 360-381.

[24] See Robert Rotberg, "Failed states in a world of Terror", *Foreign Affairs*, 81,4, July-August 2002

[25]   Robert   Kaplan,   "The   Coming   Anarchy,"   *The   Atlantic*,   February   1994, (http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/),

[26] See Gavin Kitching, (2000)"Why I gave up African Studies", in Australasian Review of African Studies. volume 22 number 1, pp. 21-26; Marc Epprecht, 2003, "Africanists and Responsibility: Some Reflections", African Studies Quarterly, Volume 7, Issues 2 & 3, Fall, pp. 203-204, http://asq.africa.ufl.edu/files/Epprecht-Response-1-Vol-7-Issues-23.pdf; Danny Postel, 2003, "Out of Africa: A pioneer of African studies explains why he left the field, and

Nonetheless, it is the Afro-Optimistic perspective of scholars such as the late Cherry Gertzel[27] and the late Anthony Low[28] that should be remembered and followed, because, at the turn of the new millennium we have seen Africa trying to emerge out of its never ending crises and long bloody civil wars,[29] and more positive and hopeful images of the continent have been described and portrayed. Perhaps, it is not too late for Kitching to rejoin AFSAAP 15 years on?

The so-called 'African Renaissance' with its 'Afro-Optimism' has emerged in the discourses from the continent, offering 'African solutions to African problems'. Ironically, this renaissance was spearheaded by then South African president Thabo Mbeki, at a time when he was denying links between HIV and AIDS, and making it difficult for his population to access proven medicines (instead recommending cheaper cures such as lemon and garlic).[30] Nonetheless, this 'renaissance' soon morphed into the 'Africa Rising' thesis which has been broadly promoted to quell these historically bleak views of Africa's past and futures.[31]

The establishment and formation of the African Union (AU) has been central to this 'African Rising' discourse. African states now have the ability, if not the political willingness to 'intervene' in other states when required, to demand a level of security across the continent within and between countries.[32] There is still a role for the international community to continue to respond to Africa's ongoing challenges. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were once heralded as the key to Africa's future, [33] however, it is now timely to ask, has anything really changed for the better?

---

provokes a firestorm of debate within it," Chronicle of Higher Education, 28 March, http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i29/29a01601.htm

[27] AFSAAP, "Vale Professor Cherry Gertzel," August 26th 2015, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/08/vale-professor-cherry-gertzel/

[28] AFSAAP, "Professor Anthony Low 1927-2015", February 15th 2015, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/02/professor-anthony-low-1927-2015/

[29] see Robert Rotberg (2013) *Africa Emerges*, Polity, Cambridge.

[30] See Tanya Lyons,2009, "Globalisation, Failed States and Pharmaceutical Colonialism in Africa", in *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 2 December 2009, pp. 68-85.

[31] The Economist, *The Hopeful Continent: Africa Rising*, December 3rd, 2011, http://www.economist.com/node/21541015

[32] See Samuel M. Makinda, F. Wafula Okumu, David Mickler, (2015) *The African Union: Addressing the challenges of peace, security, and governance*, 2nd Edition, Routledge.

[33] see William Easterly, *How The Millenium development Goals are unfair to Africa*, Brookings Global Economy and Development, Working Paper 14, November 2007; See for example Nathan Andrews, Nene Ernest Khalema , N'Dri T. Assié-Lumumba (Eds.) (2015) *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Retrospect Africa's Development Beyond 2015*, Springer

To answer this question, as Severino and Ray have pointed out, we need to stop examining "yesterday's Africa"[34] and stop focusing on the usual 'African crises', and instead have a look at 'Africa today' and focus on the 'transformations' that have been witnessed across the continent. For example, since 2000 "African economies have experienced a rate of growth far higher than that of Europe or the USA."[35] The emerging economies like China, India and Brazil have been more interested in Africa as a result. This remarkable metamorphosis is impressive and warrants positive international attention, and should inspire optimism for the future. In 2015 Africans make up 16 percent of the world's population and by 2050 are expected to total one quarter. Most Africans now live in urban centres, and this defines their identities and the ways they interact with their environments and societies. Africans are framing their worldview and futures from an 'urban', rather than the traditional and stereotypical rural village perspective. Africa currently has the world's most youthful population. One quarter of the world's children live on this continent. This has enormous demographic, service delivery and economic implications. There is also a growing middle-class, albeit spread unevenly across the continent[36], and this will have massive implications for African development into the future.

The widespread adoption of modern information technologies (including phone banking, among other technologies) has enabled business and trade, and even social movements to flourish[37]. For example the massive protests against authoritarian regimes witnessed across the North African states of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, were popularly labelled 'twitter revolutions'. Mobile phone communications and social media enabled people to unite in a show of 'people power'.[38] The Marquis of Salisbury would surely have been intimidated by this ability to *unite*, when *divide and rule* had been such a success in the past (irony intended)!

---

[34] Jean-Michel Severino and Oliver Ray, (2010) *Le Temps de l'Afrique* / (2011) *Africa's Moment*, translated to English by David Fernbach, Polity, Cambridge, p. 3

[35] Jean-Michel Severino and Oliver Ray, (2010) *Le Temps de l'Afrique* / (2011) *Africa's Moment*, translated to English by David Fernbach, Polity, Cambridge, p.2

[36] Tony Binns, Alan Dixon and Etienne Nel, (2012) *Africa: Diversity and development*, Routledge, London.

[37] See F. Wafula Okumu and Samuel Makinda, "Engaging with Contemporary Africa: Key Contexts for External Actors", in David Mickler and Tanya Lyons (Eds), New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Toward Africa, Melbourne University Press, 2013, pp. 17-33

[38] Genevieve Barrons (2012) 'Suleiman: Mubarak decided to step down #egypt #jan25 OH MY GOD': examining the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 5:1, 54-67, DOI: 10.1080/17550912.2012.645669

Globalisation and communications has thus enabled Africans to impose themselves and make their mark upon the planet as a whole.[39] Furthermore, the fact that African nations make up over one-quarter (45 out of 193) of the voting bloc in the United Nations, and make up near one third (or 18 out of 53) Commonwealth countries, means that their voices will be heard in international debates and relations.

We must however, concede that the optimism inspired by the 'Africa rising' thesis is marred by **t**he continuation of civil wars and conflicts in some countries, such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and north eastern Nigeria. African states still dominate the top 20 listed countries in the Failed and Fragile States Index.[40] The 2014 Ebola Crisis across West Africa has also tragically demonstrated that some African states have a long way to go to achieve adequate and sustainable development, and that there is no simple recovery from the violence of the past.

Conclusion

This article began with the question 'how can we understand Africa, given the transformations and contradictions across the continent?', and particularly from an Australian standpoint, where there is only a limited historical connection with the countries of Africa.[41] This article has shown how the images of Africa as the 'dark continent' really only limits our understandings further, and we must all, as a bare minimum, acknowledge that Africa is not one place, nor one country, but a continent of 55 nations, with even more diversity across a range of ethnic, cultural, religious, historical, social, economic and political indicators. This article also demonstrated that because there is such a broad literature in the field of African studies, there really is no excuse not to know anything about Africa. With the increased attention to the 'decolonial perspective' in the academy, we can only hope that the knowledges about Africa will be driven by Africans, and the critique of dominant discourses will complete the liberation of Africa. However, this article has also lamented the challenges facing Australian and New Zealand based academics who have struggled to be noticed in this field of study, historically

---

[39] See William Brown and Sophie Harman (eds) African Agency in International Politics, Routledge, London and New York 2013.

[40] Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2015*, http://library.fundforpeace.org/library/fragilestatesindex-2015.pdf

[41] See Nikola Pijovic, "The Commonwealth: Australia's Traditional 'Window' into Africa", in *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 103:4, 383-397, DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2014.941195

dominated by their European and American counterparts and publishing houses. Furthermore, this article has called for a concerted effort to encourage more African-Australian/African-New Zealander scholars to contribute more widely to the academic debates in African studies.

This article argued that the impact of colonisation across the continent, although substantial, can no longer be blamed for Africa's contemporary woes, and that the problems facing individual African states, are often problems that transcend these 'artificial' political borders, and are this problems that cannot be solved within these sovereign states alone. The solutions must be by necessity coordinated at a continental level, and the African Union is well placed to handle this. We can only hope that they will have more success than the myriad of failed international interventions seen especially during the 1990s. An Afro-Optimism perspective thus holds onto a hope for Africa's future, and the African Union needs to be a key player here. The demographic shifts across the continent, aided by technological advances are encouraging Africans to create their own history and write their own narratives. Their voices thus will be heard in the international arena – their concerns will be noticed and prioritised.

Finally, this article has acknowledged that it is not all positive news across the continent, and immediate solutions to crises such as Ebola in West Africa and ongoing civil war in South Sudan are essential. However, these solutions require international understanding of these problems, their causes and consequence, and thus until we can 'define Africa' – the discourse of 'African solutions to African problems', will remain one of the biggest excuses for international relations' theorists to continue ignoring this region, at the expense of international peace and security.

Bibliography

Abass, Ademola and Dominique Mystris, (2014). "The African Union Legal Framework for protecting Asylum Seekers" (pp. 19-44), in Ademola Abass and Francesca Ippolito (Eds.), *Regional Approaches to the Protection of Aslyum Seekers: An International Legal Persepctive*, Ashgate, England/USA.

AFSAAP, (2015a) "Professor Anthony Low 1927-2015", February 15th 2015, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/02/professor-anthony-low-1927-2015/

AFSAAP, (2015b) "Vale Professor Cherry Gertzel," August 26th 2015, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/08/vale-professor-cherry-gertzel/

Agbiboa, Daniel, Nigerian State Responses to Insurgency, in John Idriss Lahai and Tanya Lyons (Eds), *African Frontiers: Insurgency, Governance and Peacebuilding in Postcolonial States*, Ashgate, London, 2015 (forthcoming).

Andrews, Nathan, Nene Ernest Khalema, N'Dri T. Assié-Lumumba (Eds.) (2015) *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Retrospect Africa's Development Beyond 2015*, Springer

Barrons, Genevieve (2012). 'Suleiman: Mubarak decided to step down #egypt #jan25 OH MY GOD': examining the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 5:1, 54-67, DOI: 10.1080/17550912.2012.645669

Bienvenue, Emily, (2010). "The Safeguarding of International Shipping: A Solution to Somali Piracy?" *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 31: 2, pp.30-50.

Binns, Tony, Alan Dixon and Etienne Nel, (2012). *Africa: Diversity and development*, Routledge, London.

Brown, William and Sophie Harman (eds) (2013). *African Agency in International Politics*, Routledge, London and New York.

Cameron, Colin, (2006). "Remembering Rwanda" in Lyons and Pye (Eds.) *Africa on a Global Stage*, Africa World Press, New Jersey.

Chazan, Naomi, et al, (1999) *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder

Doom, R., & Vlassenroot, K. (1999). Kony's Message: A New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. *African Affairs, 98*: 390, pp. 5-36;

Easterly, William, (2007). *How The Millenium development Goals are unfair to Africa*, Brookings Global Economy and Development, Working Paper 14, November

Economist, The, (2011). 'The Hopeful Continent: Africa Rising', December 3rd, http://www.economist.com/node/21541015

Engel, Ulf and Gorm Rye Olsen, (2005). *Africa and the North: between Globalization and Marginalization*, Routledge, London.

Engel, Ulf and Gorm Rye Olsen, (2014). *Africa and the North: between Globalization and Marginalization*, Routledge, London, 2005; and Tim Murithi (Ed), *Handbook of Africa's International Relations*, Routledge, London.

Epprecht, Marc, (2003). "Africanists and Responsibility: Some Reflections", African Studies Quarterly, 7: 2 & 3, Fall, pp. 203-204, http://asq.africa.ufl.edu/files/Epprecht-Response-1-Vol-7-Issues-23.pdf;

Feierman, Stephen, (1993). "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History," in Robert Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds. *Africa and*

the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities, Chicago, University of Chicago Press

Fund for Peace, (2015) *Fragile States Index 2015*, http://library.fundforpeace.org/library/fragilestatesindex-2015.pdf

Gascoyne-Cecil, Robert Arthur Talbot, the 3rd Marquis of Salisbury and British Prime Minister, as reported in "The Mansion House Banquet to her Majesty's Ministers", *The Times,* 7 August 1890, p. 6.

Gordon, April and Donald (Eds.) (2001). *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, 3rd Edition, Lynne Reinner, Boulder.

Kaplan, Robert, (1994). "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic*, February, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/

Kitching, Gavin, (2000). "Why I gave up African Studies", in *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 22: 1, pp. 21-26.

Lahai, John Idriss and Tanya Lyons, "Armed Insurgency in Somalia and the Dilemma of Projecting a Liberal Agenda for Peace" (TBA in process);

Leithead, Alasdair (2002) "Africa's oldest map unveiled", BBC News World Edition, 12th November, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2446907.stm

Loudon, Bruce, (2015) "Sea of Chaos and despair for African Refugees", in *The Australian* – 21 April 2015 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/sea-of-chaos-and-despair-for-african-refugees/story-e6frg6z6-1227312518392

Lyons, Tanya (2009). "Globalisation, Failed States and Pharmaceutical Colonialism in Africa", in *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30: 2 December, pp. 68-85.

Lyons, Tanya and Elizabeth Dimock, (2007). *The State of African Studies in Australia,*", in Paul Zeleza (ed*) The Study of Africa Volume 2, Global and Transnational Engagements*, CODESRIA.

Lyons, Tanya, (2013). "Education in Australia's Relationship With Africa", in David Mickler and Tanya Lyons (eds) *New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Toward Africa*, Melbourne University Press, (pp. 193-223).

Lyons, Tanya, (2015) "Journal Rankings and the Australasian Review of African Studies, in *AFSAAP News*, http://afsaap.org.au/2015/03/journal-rankings-and-the-australasian-review-of-african-studies/

Makinda, Samuel M., F. Wafula Okumu, David Mickler, (2015). *The African Union: Addressing the challenges of peace, security, and governance*, 2nd Edition, Routledge.

Melvern, Linda, (2000) *A people betrayed: The role of the west in Rwanda's genocide*, Zed Books

Mudimbe, V. Y. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, (1993) "The Impact of African Studies on Philosophy," in Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds. *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, (pp. 113-138).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. (2013). *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity,* Berghahn Books, New York, NY;

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. (2012) "Coloniality of Power in Development Studies and the Impact of Global Imperial Designs on Africa", *Australasian Review of African Studies Volume* 33: 2, pp. 48-73

Ofuho, Cirino Hiteng, (2003). "The changing Images of a continent: An eclectic survey of Writings on Africa in the international system", in *Global Society*, 17: 2, pp. 151-164

Okumu, F. Wafula and Samuel Makinda, (2013) "Engaging with Contemporary Africa: Key Contexts for External Actors", in David Mickler and Tanya Lyons (Eds), New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Toward Africa, Melbourne University Press, pp. 17-33

Pijovic, Nikola, (2012) "It is Chaotic But Not Chaos": Civil society, Local Governance and the Construction of Political Order In and Around Mogadishu, *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 33: 2, pp. 29-47.

Pijovic, Nikola, (2014) "The Commonwealth: Australia's Traditional 'Window' into Africa", in *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 103:4, 383-397, DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2014.941195

Postel, Danny, (2003), "Out of Africa: A pioneer of African studies explains why he left the field, and provokes a firestorm of debate within it," Chronicle of Higher Education, 28 March, http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i29/29a01601.htm

Reid, Richard (2012) *A History of Modern Africa 1800 to the Present*, 2nd edition, Wiley-Blackwell, UK

Reno, William (1999) *Warlord Politics and African States*, Lynne Reinner, Colorado

Richards, Paul, (1996) *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone,* Oxford, James Currey

Rotberg, Robert (2013) *Africa Emerges*, Polity, Cambridge.

Rotberg, Robert, (2002) "Failed states in a world of Terror", *Foreign Affairs*, 81: 4, July-August

Russell, Alec, (1999) *Big Men: Little People: Encounters in Africa*, London, MacMillan.

Said, Edward, (1978), *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin

Severino, Jean-Michel and Oliver Ray, (2010) *Le Temps de l'Afrique* / (2011) *Africa's Moment*, translated to English by David Fernbach, Polity, Cambridge

Sulemana, Mohammed and Govand Azeez, (2015), "Rethinking Islamism in Western Africa", *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Vol 36: No.1, June, pp. 51-67;

Sulemana, Mohammed, (2014) "Centenary of failure? Boko Haram, Jihad and the Nigerian reality", in Australasian Review of African Studies, Vol 35: No. 2, December, pp. 69-87.

Thomson, Alex (2000) *An Introduction to African Politics*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London and New York

UNHCR (2014) *War's Human Cost: Global Trends 2013*, Report at http://www.unhcr.org/5399a14f9.html

Vinci, A. (2005). The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army. *Small Wars & Insurgencies, 16*(3), 360-381.

White, Tim, "Human Origins: It Began in Africa", *New Scientist*, Vol 208, Issue, 2785, doi:10.1016/S0262-4079(10)62762-5