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**Дмитрий Бондаренко**, Институт Африки РАН, Национальный  
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# INTRODUCTION

## **PLURAL TRAJECTORIES: INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN FUTURES**

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David O’KANE, Max Planck, Institute for Social Anthropology  
BONDARENKO Dmitri M., Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences and National Research University Higher School of Economics

*Abstract. The editors of this issue of the Journal of the Institute for African Studies introduce the theme of African futures, and insist on the plural meanings it involves as both a concept and an empirical reality. The relationship between the continent’s futures and its multiple pasts and presents are considered, and the concept of ‘trajectory’ is used to integrate those multiple African realities into an integrated picture of human agency and human action in the continent today. The editors then introduce the papers that follow in this special issue.*

*Keywords: Africa, Culture, Decolonization, Postcolonial*

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Africa’s multiple futures are becoming a more and more important issue among observers of the continent, and are posing some key intellectual challenges to them. The blithe assumptions of upward progress that followed decolonization were replaced, in the 1980s and after, with a more general sense of gloom and apprehension about the prospects for any sort of amelioration among the fifty-four states that make up. The apparent progress – in some areas and for some people – made in Africa since then is a change that demands a more detailed and deliberative analysis. This special issue represents a contribution to that analysis, and brings together a diverse range of papers dealing in plural ways with Africa’s plural futures. The debates it involves are, in some ways, not entirely new. Several generations of African intellectuals have considered the paths through which their lands may move forward, a task which continues today (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, for a representative example). The role of the African past in the present is key here: it is indeed a ‘powerful presence of the past’, whether considered as part of the legacy of colonialism that still distorts Africa’s politics, economics and society, or the more-or-less idealised pre-colonial past to which so many still hark back to, seeing that past as a solution to contemporary predicaments. The persistent need for such a solution inevitably makes the theme of African futures an urgent and pressing one. Discourses of the past can only inform the problems of the present if they can provide an intellectual springboard for agendas of the future. Histories of peoples provide a starting point for the creation of the futures: the turmoil of African history in the twentieth century was not only a reaction to the iniquities of the past, but also the result of a determination of Africa’s peoples to write their futures autonomously, without the distortions of external control or exogenous shocks. We now find ourselves in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and we can

now begin an accounting of the trajectories being taken by the continent under both external influence and internal drive to self-determination: hence, this special issue, which contributes to an understanding of those trajectories, their origins, and destinations.

The concept of 'trajectory' is essential here, whether we apply it to ethnic groups, social classes, nation-states, or even to the continent as a whole. Nearly twenty years ago, the historian Frederick Cooper argued that the concept of globalization was not a useful one, at least not for the purposes of African studies (2001). For most people at that time, 'globalization' was still both an excitingly novel concept and a fashionable buzzword, but Cooper took a far more sceptical approach to the concept, by pointing to the reality of an African past which contained many historical precedents for the patterns of globalization that were occurring in the late twentieth century, and not only in Africa. This critique of globalization was a necessary corrective to the simplistic and ideological versions of that concept that were present in much globalization discourse at the time, and not only in relation to Africa. It could also, however, have been accused of portraying an Africa frozen in time, a continent in which nothing much ever really changes. If we complement our conception of African pasts and presents with the concept of African futures, then we can trace the various paths (plural and multiple) which Africa will take into those futures. For this tracing of present and future paths, we need the concept of trajectory, a concept with which we can scrutinize present day African realities.

Certain concepts from the natural sciences can be adapted and translated into social scientific forms: 'trajectory' is one of them. In physics, the concept of trajectory involves the movement of objects through space and time, in a way that can be conceptualised and defined in fully mathematical terms. The phenomena studied by the social sciences cannot be pinned down with precision equivalent to those of the physical sciences, but those phenomena can still be rigorously grasped by social scientists, and if they can rigorously define the pressures and forces that act on those phenomena, from their initial launchings to their ultimate end-points. The particular societies that make up Africa as a whole all move through history in particular directions, directions that are shaped by those societies' particular endowments of social institutions, cultural systems and historical legacies. At the same time, they are subject to the same exogenous pressures as other African states, pressures that would in the past have been called imperialism or colonialism, and which today we call globalization. Their particular, individual reactions to those common pressures and individual inheritances are what shape African realities – plural – today.

The seven papers collected in this issue of *the Journal of the Institute for African Studies* deal with very different cases and themes, and do so from varying theoretical perspectives, but they all represent efforts to scrutinize those African realities. Their variance in perspectives is not an accident, but rather a necessary reflection of Africa's increasing contemporary diversity, a diversity that is likely to continue, and grow, as the continent enters into both its immediate and long-term future. This makes the problem of prediction in Africa complex, and implies that successful prediction of such futures cannot rely on imported models imported from outside, or from naïve extrapolations of current trends. This is where the concept of trajectory can help, as by focussing on what is unique to those countries that share in a common African situation, it can help avoid teleological assumptions about the future outcomes of present conditions in the continent.

This point is illustrated by some recent contributions to the debate on the nature and meaning of African middle classes (and the debate over whether such classes exist at all). Some of the popular media representations of the African middle classes, for example, have tended to assume that the emergence of such classes in African societies will have generally equivalent consequences across the continent, and will follow similar patterns to those of other parts of the world. As a recent volume demonstrates, there is no good reason to believe that the consequences of middle class emergence in Africa will be either uniform, or uniformly positive (Kroeker, O'Kane and Scharrer 2018). Another current heated debate, on the

prospects of democratization in Africa, also makes one believe that its trajectories are and will be multiple (Agostinho 2017). The protests of the early 1990s that ended single-party in so many African countries were seen as part of a 'third wave' of democratization (Huntington 1991). We can now see that this 'wave' has been diverted into many different directions, which will all have different outcomes. Recent elections in Sierra Leone and Kenya, to take two very different examples, have produced different results: a relatively peaceful series of post-civil war elections in the Sierra Leonean case appear to signal some sort of political stabilization that bodes well for democratic trends in that country (Bangura 2018: 22). This contrasts sharply with the persistent capacity of electoral politics to destabilise inter-ethnic relations in Kenya, something that occurred again during that country's election of 2017 (Ahere 2018: 108).

Even if both of those (very different) African states can advance towards stable and sustained democratisation, their political futures will be substantially different in form, regardless of the outcomes of their past or present crises. This persistence of difference will parallel continuing affinities and similarities of African societies experiencing their particular trajectories within the continent's overall trajectory. This is one reason why this special issue together such an apparently (at first sight) heterogeneous set of papers. They deal with issues such as the changing face of African unity, cinema in Nigeria and Ghana, industrialization in Zambia, the use of mobile phone technology by the Islamist terrorists of Boko Haram, the ambiguous relationship between Rwanda and the People's Republic of China and the interplay of climate change and politics in nineteenth-century Morocco. The latter paper, by Madia Thomson, may yet prove to be the most important of these, given that the world shows no sign of taking effect action to stem the tide of climate change in the twenty-first century. As temperatures rise, all African societies will face serious challenges to their relationships with their environments and to each other. This may lead to increased political conflict, or be reflected in the popular cultures of the continent, or may lead to attempts at renovating relationships with external patrons and clients, and will be a new complicating factor facing any near-future efforts for the creation of African unity. And in addition to this novel complicating factor, another of the exogenous shocks which Africa has faced throughout its modern history, it will also have to deal with the complications produced by all the endogenous factors that affect the individual trajectories of African societies and states. In the rest of this introductory essay the editors outline what they see as the most important of those factors.

### **Singular roots of Africa's Plural Trajectories? The Precolonial and Colonial Backgrounds**

The concept of an African historical trajectory has been implicit in much past work on the continent, even if that work has assumed a strong tendency to cultural conservatism in African societies and the avoidance of political innovation – a picture present, for example, in the work of Max Gluckman, who argued that political change in southern Africa occurred via transitions to regimes that involved minimal political innovation, being as they were acts of 'rebellion', rather than cases of 'revolution' (Gluckman 1965: 137). Igor Kopytoff, in his seminal work on the African frontier, detailed the ways in which the peopling of Africa occurred through the pulse-like fissioning of African polities, and the retention by the seceding entities of the political ideologies and principles they had known in their previous locations (1987). We do not have to revive discredited notions of some innate 'African essence' to recognize that certain persistent patterns have occurred, and continue to occur, in the continent's social and political life. Specific kinds of landlord-stranger relationships, particular modes of kingship, and the attachment to kinship of certain forms of political importance can all be identified in precolonial African polities. Henri Claessen's comparative studies of complex precolonial African polities ("early states"), for example, identified features common to Afri-

can polities that, in their integrity, distinguish those polities from early states elsewhere: these included the sacred status of the supreme ruler, dynastic election as the mode through which supreme power was passed on, an important role for royal female relatives (mothers and sisters) in the political system, the organization of bodies of titled chiefs as collective checks on the royal power, and some others (Claessen 1981; 1987; 2015). Michal Tymowski (2009) also identifies, as typical features of African polities, such factors as the divine character of monarchic rule, dynastic principles of succession, specific forms of control over rulers by chiefs and so forth.

In other words, pre-colonial Africa south of the Sahara quite clearly represented a distinctive “civilizational model” (Bondarenko and Korotayev 2000), one that followed its own trajectory or “evolutionary stream” (Claessen 2000). This was a manifestation of the African socio-cultural tradition that first emerged as a durable *modus vivendi*. Central to this was the principle of communality. This principle, which was common to the majority of historical and contemporary sub-Saharan African societies and cultures, involves the spread of an essentially communal worldview. This worldview involves forms of consciousness, patterns of behaviour, socio-political norms and relations that permeate all levels of societal organization, including the supra- and non-communal. Thus, communality follows from, but is by no means reducible to, the fact that the local community has always remained the basic social institution in Africa, the core of social life and the factor that has determined the specificity of African authentic worldview and spirituality. This remains true to the present day (Bondarenko 2015).

If, however, we look at Africa from a different perspective – if, to be precise, we compare pre-colonial African cultures not with non-African ones but with each other – we will immediately notice significant differences between them. On the one hand, these differences are typological; for example, pre-colonial African societies manifested various degrees of political and cultural complexity (the phenomenon first studied so prominently in Fortes’ and Evans-Prichard’s *African Political Systems* [1940]). On the other hand, there is also good reason to cluster pre-colonial African societies geographically into areas with more or less similar forms of culture, social and political organization, and with directions of socio-cultural changes within each of them. This would entail, for example, opposing West African to East African societies, those of Western Sudan to the societies of the Congo river basin, societies of the savannah to those of the tropical forest zone, and so forth (see, *e.g.*, Sow *et al.* 1977; Ogot 1985; Bondarenko 1997). So, even in pre-colonial times one can already observe both the unity of African cultures and societies *vs.* their non-African counterparts, and the diversity of transformational trajectories among them.

The shocks of the colonial era, despite all the corruptions of African cultures they wrought, could not force the disappearance of African civilization and its unity, based on the communal socio-cultural tradition. On the contrary, as Claude Meillassoux (1991) emphasized, the community turned out to be an indispensable part of the colonial system, without which colonial exploitation could not have been effective and perhaps not even possible (at least not on the scale observed in history). What did increase as a result of the colonial era, however, was the degree of socio-cultural diversity and hence, diversity of trajectories of change across sub-Saharan Africa across as a whole. This was so because the colonial borders did not reflect the preceding course of the African peoples’ own political, social, economic, and cultural history. The artificial and imposed nature of African borders is a perennial cliché of commentary on the continent, and much of that commentary is flawed because it involves assumptions about African tendencies towards homogeneity and stability, the equally unjustified assumption that African polities would have evolved towards ethnic homogeneity, and the entirely false implication that a new partition of Africa could produce ethnically homogeneous nation states without ethnic cleansing of a gross and aggravated kind. Even before the colonial era, African trajectories were plural, and African societies were plural: colonialism’s effect was to block or divert the trajectories of those societies, and change the nature of the

plural relationships within them. With rare exceptions, many different peoples were forcibly united within a colony. Not only kinship but also cultural affinity among those peoples was often absent. At the same time, the colonial borders divided one people or tore historically established regional systems of economic and cultural ties not less infrequently. Likewise the colonialists forcibly united peoples that had never formed regional political and economic systems, had different levels of sociocultural complexity, and sometimes did not even know about each other or were historic enemies. At the same time, historically and economically connected peoples and societies were often separated by the colonial borders. These features were supplemented by the socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of the colonial societies. The elements of capitalism, implanted by the Europeans in different spheres, did not synthesize with a set of pre-capitalist features of the local societies. There also was little intersection between the autochthonous and new sectors of public life, in which basically different value systems dominated. The artificial complexity of cultural and societal composition, socio-economic and civilizational heterogeneity remained fundamental features of most of colonial societies throughout their existence, and were inherited by postcolonial societies together with the colonial borders: this contributed significantly to the subsequent diversification of the transformational trajectories visible in Africa today.

Those trajectories might now be very different, had they not been blown off-course by an unexpected exogenous shock which snuffed out a whole set of alternative African futures. Today, we call that shock 'colonialism'. Its legacy is widely considered to dominate African trajectories to this day – and not without reason. As Aimé Césaire famously said, one of the key parts of that legacy was that it led to 'possibilities being snuffed out'. We cannot know what would have happened had Africa not been partitioned at Berlin in 1885, but we can say that the continent would have displayed even more plural trajectories than it does today. At the very least the negotiation of the continent's relationship with global capitalism would have been more complex and ambiguous than it otherwise was. Some parts of Africa might have followed the example of Japan, and borrowed the forms and technologies of modernity to sustain civilizations and social orders that differed radically from the west. Others might have been dominated by such local imperial powers (as other parts of the Horn of Africa have been by Ethiopia): another Asian example that would be relevant here would be that of Thailand. That south-east Asian kingdom preserved a nominal political independence while most of its neighbours (Burma, Indochina, and Malaya) were incorporated into the British or French colonial empires.

The case of Thailand has been credibly analysed as a case in which the economic dominance of imperial states at the core of the world economy undermined the political independence of the dominated peripheral state, even if that state was not formally colonised (Hong 2008). This highlights a certain key factor to bear in mind when discussing historical and contemporary trajectories of all the former colonised lands and the ways in which they were shaped by the interventions of the colonial powers: modes of economic domination were not necessarily identical with, or even present in cases of outright political subordination to a colonial regime. This led to different political outcomes and experiences – and even in those cases where outright political subordination was the prevailing mode of power, the outcomes of interventions by colonial regimes could differ radically from those originally intended. Consider this remark from a review of a report on British colonial education in the 1930s:

One cannot help sympathising with the enraged African described in the Tanganyika report who hurled on the ground the clay and paper models made by his son, saying that the boy had come to school to learn to read and write and not to play stupid games. (Mumford and Parker 1937: 28-29)

This incident was only case in many where a British imperial administration was rapidly coming up against the limits of its capacity to influence and control African populations. After the Second World War, those limits would become obvious to all, and could no longer be



denied. This was evident in the failure of, for example, British imperial exercises in colonial education that had been intended to produce malleable ‘native’ elites (Corby 1990). Graduates of those systems, and their equivalents in other parts of colonial Africa, were in the front ranks of movements pushing hard for independence in the years after 1945. The key point here is that the outcome of those experiments in colonial education demonstrates the importance of the concept of an historical trajectory. Corby notes the contrast between colonial and indigenous education: the latter prepared rising generations for integration into their local African societies, while the former was intended to shunt the direction of those societies into directions more amenable to colonial goals. As the episode of the enraged Tanganyikan father cited above, the actual direction that resulted from these efforts was not always, or ever, that which had been intended by the colonial authorities.

Different outcomes were also present in the historical experience of post-colonial Africa. The years of decolonization were attended by optimistic assumption that ‘development’, however it might be conceived, was soon to be a reality in the continent. Political strife and economic crisis soon put a stop to that optimism, but even after passing through the multiple traumas of the structural adjustment era, African societies showed (in most cases) a degree of resilience that would allow them to take up new trajectories. In the next section, we return to the definition of this concept, and the demonstration of its relevance.

### **Refining the concept of ‘trajectory’**

In the aftermath of the cold war, Francis Fukuyama famously declared the end of history (1989). He has since come to revise his opinion, arguing that proliferation of ‘identity politics’ is not only a poor substitute for universalist social democracy, but that it also threatens the same liberal democracy he once thought victorious (Fukuyama 2018). It now appears, in the wake of renewed global capitalist crisis, that the ‘riddle of history’ has not, in fact, been solved, and that the human race was not going to converge on the shared idea that liberal democracy was the ultimate and best form of governmental and social order. Fukuyama’s original argument had been a return to Hegelian concepts of human history, according to which the whole species was presumed to be travelling towards a common shared destination along one single trajectory.

The statement that nations, ethnic groups, social classes *et cetera* all move through time is a point that seems (and is) trivially obvious. What are not obvious are the sources of those movements. Why should societies and their constituent parts move in this direction and not some other? One answer may lie, we think, in not only noting the existence of the particular endowments of social institutions, cultural systems and historical legacies that are in play in each particular case, but in really investigating the interactions between them. This means capturing the ‘whole equation’ of the relationship between those endowments, not in the sense of any imitation of the physical sciences that use the ‘trajectory’ concept in their own, but in the sense of viewing the relationship between endowments, and the ways in which individuals and groups use those endowments, as something which involves complex and unpredictable effects on each other.

In a broader sense, then, this concept may be seen as another attempt to look at human history from a non-linear, non-directional perspective, a perspective that is becoming more and more widely recognized as essential in many sciences, ranging from archaeology to complexity studies (see Baskin and Bondarenko 2014: 89 – 125). Marc Garcelon, for example, views the disintegration of the late Soviet Union, and post-war Iraq as being examples where endogenous and exogenous factors precipitated revolutionary situations that redirected individual agency and action away from previous trajectories and on to new ones (2006). Those previous trajectories would have involved the reproduction and maintenance of pre-existing social institutions: they would have been replaced by new forms of habitus, agency, and the

rupture between old and new forms would have involved the creation of new institutional forms.

Garcelon uses this perspective in order to unlock the general lessons to be learned from 'explanatory narratives', which by virtue of dealing with this or that case can risk being limited in their lessons only to those specific cases to which they refer. We believe that Africa, also, has many such explanatory narratives: to understand the general lessons of these narratives of a diverse continent, it is necessary to draw out the general points they contain about human agency and action in Africa, and to understand the plural trajectories. All the papers in this issue engage in that effort.

### **The Papers in this Issue**

Msellemu and Machangu reflect on the fate of the concept of African unity, what it meant in the twentieth century, and what it might mean in the twenty-first century. The unification of Africa in the twenty-first century, as it was in the twentieth century, is compromised by Africa's penetration by external powers, both old and new. The comments on the difficulties involved in realising pan-African unity draw on the past and present, and highlight the difficulties inherent in realising that dream in the future. Innocent Ebere Uwah, in his account of Nollywood and Ghallywood cinema, gives an account of how two African societies have taken external media technologies and cultural forms, and reused and reshaped them according to their own local purposes and needs. In Nigeria and Ghana, the wider dissemination of video recording technologies has allowed for the democratization of access to cinematic production, which has in turn been used to reproduce older cultural themes, including the theme of communality. Uwah's analysis of the place of this theme in two contemporary digital video productions in Nigeria and Ghana not only highlights the persistence of that theme in the cultures of African societies, and implies that they will continue into the future.

That future will include the 'electronic revolution' that is currently taking place in Africa. This revolution is most strongly associated with the spread of the mobile telephone as a key technology of everyday life. The penetration of that technology into African social life has often been seen as both positive, and as involving distinct and creative responses by African people to this new means of communication (Srinivasan et al 2019). In showing how that technology can be exploited by the Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram, Bukola Oyeniya demonstrates how the intrusion of modern technologies into Africa may be more complex in its course, and its consequences, than some of this thinking supposes. New means of communications may provide mobilised citizens with the means to (for example) hold politicians accountable, and enhance the democratisation of their societies: Srinivasan et al note how this has occurred in Kenya (Srinivasan et al 2019: 4). It is quite clear from Oyeniya's cases that this is by no means the only political use to which mobile phone technologies can be put. In the north-eastern region of Nigeria, where that country's borders meet Niger and Cameroon, a particular brand of mobile phone became highly sought after by Boko Haram, and not for positive purposes either.

North-eastern Nigeria stands in a peripheral and neglected relationship to the rest of the country; hence the opportunities for a group like Boko Haram. Africa as a whole continues to stand in a peripheral and underdeveloped relationship to the rest of the world economy. The turbulence of Africa's economies, and by direct extension, of its societies since the post-independence era can be attributed to that relationship between the continent and the wider world. What does this imply for the trajectories of the continent in the coming century? Economic considerations, and external relations, are at the heart of Kamini Krishna's text, which examines the vagaries of industrialisation in Zambia, a state whose trajectories have been particularly complicated. It is not only economic power that seeks to penetrate Africa, of course; there is also cultural power. Tarrosy and Vörös, in their account of Rwanda's dealings with

the People's Republic of China, give us some idea of how that penetration might be dealt with. These papers show that if there is a 'scramble for Africa' in the twenty-first century, it will differ remarkably from its nineteenth century predecessor.

Madia Thomson returns to the African past, specifically to the late nineteenth century, and to the ways in which climatic change shaped the trajectory of politics in Morocco. Timm Sureau in his paper on South Sudan argues that its historical and cultural past makes effective introduction of European political models problematic. These papers are all explanatory narratives, in one way or another; they all describe the interaction of human agency with institutional structures; and the outcomes of those interactions produce the plural trajectories they describe. These cases are all very different, but they all share one common denominator – they are occurring in Africa. This means that their particular unique trajectories will be shaped by the general trajectory of the continent, and that trajectory will in turn be shaped by the increasing threat of anthropogenic climate change.

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## **МНОЖЕСТВЕННЫЕ ТРАЕКТОРИИ: ВВЕДЕНИЕ В АФРИКАНСКОЕ БУДУЩЕЕ**

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Дэвид О'КЕЙН, Институт социальной антропологии им. Макса Планка  
БОНДАРЕНКО Дмитрий Михайлович, Институт Африки РАН, Национальный исследова-  
тельский университет Высшая школа экономики

*Аннотация. Редакторы этого номера журнала «Ученые записки Института Африки РАН» представляют тему будущего Африки и настаивают на его множественном значении – и как концепции, и как эмпирической реальности. Рассматриваются взаимоотношения между будущим континента и его многообразным прошлым и настоящим, а концепция «траектории» используется для интеграции этих многообразных африканских реалий в целостную картину человеческого фактора и деятельности человека на континенте в настоящее время.*

*Ключевые слова: Африка, культура, деколонизация, постколониальность*

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