AFRICAN ENGAGEMENTS: ON WHOSE TERMS? AFRICA NEGOTIATING AN EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Introduction: A changing world and its consequences

During the recent World EXPO in Shanghai, most African countries were housed under one roof, a huge building bustling with activity. The African dances and the loud drumming attracted many Chinese visitors, who were amazed, thrilled and shocked at the same time. The African market stalls (see book cover) were also popular. EXPO’s title was ‘Better City, Better Life’, and the organisers had tried to convince the African contributors that it would be nice to stick to that general theme. Few did, even after accepting generous Chinese support. Many of the African pavilions showed rural Africa as a paradise for investors and tourists, with scenes of Africa’s exotic nature and people and with a general message that Africa is a continent full of resources to exploit (cf. Dietz 2011: 5). But on whose terms? EXPO’s experience may be seen as symbolic of Africa being quite capable of carving out its own negotiation space. The world’s emerging multipolarity creates obvious tensions but also opportunities for the many different African players on the world’s geopolitical chessboard.

Consider the following one out of many Sino-African encounters currently taking place within Africa:

In Senegal, near Touba, the religious capital of the Murids (a Senegalese Islamic sufi order), a new road was inaugurated. This road had been financed and built by the Chinese, and, for the inauguration, the Senegalese president had come with a large following of officials, as well as the Chinese consul and his entourage. Important representatives of the religious elite from Touba attended the ceremony, too. There were many speeches, and the Chinese consul met with much enthusiasm when he spoke some words in vernacular. The crowd applauded the president, the religious leaders, and the consul. The
Murid leaders thanked the president, and the president self-assuredly took his time to receive their blessings before thanking the consul. In the meantime, in Dakar, traders were preparing a protest against the invasion of the Senegalese capital by Chinese merchants, backed by some important opposition parties.¹

It is clear that today’s world is not the world of the 1990s and – not surprising to Africans or Africanists but perhaps to others – this also holds true when viewed from the African continent. With the end of the Cold War, the world seemed to move from a bipolar system to a unipolar world in which the neoliberal West globally imposes its laws. However, during the last decade it has been acknowledged that other actors, such as China, India and Brazil, have become increasingly influential, creating multipolarity at the global level (DIE 2006; Dollar 2007; Clegg 2009). It is important to understand what this emerging multipolarity means for Africa. Will Africa fall victim to a new scramble over raw materials and political hegemony between superpowers (e.g. Lee 2006)? Or does this new multipolarity offer African countries greater room for negotiation and manoeuvring, eventually leading to stronger democracy, enhanced growth, and increased possibilities to address their own problems (e.g. Alden 2008; Vittorini & Harris 2009)?

From a Western perspective, non-Western actors intervening in Africa are often considered as mere geopolitical players. Transnational Islamic NGOs, for instance, are usually portrayed as part of a hegemonic project of the Arab world (Kaag 2007). The same tendency can be recognised in discussions about Chinese interventions, in which it is often stressed that these interventions are merely led by the demand for raw materials. This may be partly true, but there is more to it. Different layers have to be distinguished, as is illustrated by the Senegalese example above. Apart from the strategies of superpowers, there are also the ideologies and objectives of intervening organisations, the views and actions of the representatives of these organisations in Africa, and the ways in which African actors attract and respond to these external interventions and use them in their own complex strategies (Nolutshungu 1996; see also Kaag 2008). What also matters is that the number of emerging players seems to increase: ever more Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern governments, businesses and cultural organisations appear on the scene, partly mak-