

Decoloniality or Innovation: Two New Perspectives on African Administrations

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Introduction

Public administration and public services are major issues for the present and future of African countries. They are also central themes for social science research. For a long time, researchers have bemoaned the paucity of work on contemporary African administrations (Darbon, 1985; Copans, 2001). Fortunately, times are changing: more and more theses, articles and books are devoted to them, and African researchers are now at the forefront of the discipline (among many others, cf. Bako Arifari, 1999; Tidjani Alou, 2001, 2009; Koné, 2003; Diarra, 2010; Hamani, 2011; Issaley, 2018). This special issue of *Global Africa* is therefore part of this trend, but it also intends to go further and propose two new and complementary perspectives on the subject. One deals with the colonial legacies of administrations, and opens a debate around the decolonial paradigm and its application to African states. The other focuses on internal innovations, and aims to put the identification and documentation of reformers within administrations and public services on agenda of African research.

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The articles in this issue are the result of two related processes. On the one hand, our journal's Junior Researchers' Institute (JRI), which offers rigorously selected young researchers from across the continent the opportunity to publish quality articles under expert mentorship, held its first session in Niamey in 2023 on the theme of decoloniality in public administration. On the other hand, LASDEL organized in Niamey, in 2023, a colloquium on internal innovations in public services, focusing on this hitherto neglected endogenous dimension of government operations in African countries. These two initiatives can be seen as advances in research on public administrations in Africa, and as moving in the same direction. The decolonial perspective is part of a necessary historical diagnosis of how states and public services function, in order to break free from the shackles of the past. Focusing on endogenous reforms opens up alternatives to dependence on external aid and colonial and neo-colonial legacies, in order to improve the quality of services delivered to users.

Decolonization and Administration

The Junior Researchers' Institute (JRI) enabled young researchers to work on the decolonization of future African administrations. The subject is a daunting one, since it brings together a range of social science disciplines, with uneven levels of comfort in terms of thinking, but heuristic and therefore fertile for reflection, as shown by the contributions submitted during the first session of the JRI. Obviously, they were of varying quality, and only one text appears in this issue.

Above all, decolonial thought aims to break with the past and renew itself. It originated in Latin America, and has continued in North American and European universities, as well as on our continent, notably in South Africa, through strong symbolic struggles that open up new perspectives for reflection and research. The axes proposed to the young researchers at this workshop highlighted words such as “subtract”, “liberate” or “refund” (subtracting future administrators from the bureaucratic library, liberating future administrators from the grip of permanent reform, refunding a new African administrative praxis). The aim is to promote militant research that is freed from the dominant hold of Western coloniality, and which aims to deploy other forms of knowledge, more firmly rooted in the local realities of the countries concerned.

Today, decoloniality is one of the paradigms that generate a great deal of interest and controversy in social sciences, all the more so as it stems from philosophical and literary disciplines. Various criticisms have been voiced regarding the ability of the decolonial paradigm to understand post-colonial African states (Taiwo 2022).

It is therefore logical that *Global Africa* should propose a debate on the potential and limits of the decolonial grid to analyze one of the most striking reminders of the colonial era in Africa, namely modern administrations. A great deal of work¹ has already been done on this subject, revealing and better understanding the dynamics of the state and its administrations in Africa, from colonization to the present day. Indeed, African administrations remain institutions powerfully shaped by the paradigms of importation (Badie, 2002), lack (Anders, 2010; Bako-Arifari, 2001, 2006; Bayart, Hibou & Ellis, 1997), fragility and deficiency (Cameron, 2010; Bayart, 1989), inertia and absence of doctrine (Darbon & Crouzel, 2009). Day-to-day analysis of public administrations often reveals faulty and deviant political and bureaucratic apparatuses, as well as interactions characterized by domination and even violence: in the relationship between public administrations and citizens, the challenges of efficiency, diversity, equity and inclusion are far from having been overcome. These problems have justified a permanent and chaotic engineering of reform largely driven by the Western development industry, with serious practical and symbolic consequences (Easterly, 2010; Machikou, 2013, 2014; Darbon, 1985, 1990).

1 The work of the transnational research group (GRT) on “The bureaucratization of African societies”(2017-2021), which has produced some interesting results (<https://www.dhi-paris.fr/fr/recherche/projekte-kurzzeit-ehemalige/la-bureaucratization-des-societes-africaines.html>); the work of the “States at Work” research group, which has also produced some impressive results in the book edited by Bierschenk T. & Olivier de Sardan J.-P. 2014, “States at Work”, Brill

There is a need, of course, to question the relevance of the decolonial paradigm to African contexts, going beyond its strictly ideological dimension and putting it to the test of solid research programs. One way of doing this would be to direct research activities towards empirically grounded decolonial studies, based on rigorous problematics and hypotheses to ensure their lasting scientific relevance.

The article published in this issue from Junior Researchers' Institute focuses on “the fight against corrupt practices through the digitization of public administration in Africa”, and shows the kind of use that can be made of the decolonial problematic.

Reformers from within

The second section of this issue, concerns innovations within government departments, and reformers from below. In this respect, we must admit that public services are sometimes sustained by the inventiveness and personal investment of certain agents. Just about everywhere, we come across admirable exceptions, agents who “get by” and try, in the midst of extreme hardship, to deliver better-quality services, to cobble together improvements - however minor - for the benefit of users, to organize work better, to create collaborations with communities and local authorities, drive change within service routines, adapt (in their own way) to the specific contexts of villages and neighborhoods the “traveler models” and standardized interventions implemented in many countries by external partners (Olivier de Sardan, 2021).

In fact, we’re dealing with endogenous innovations, local initiatives, “insider” reforms that exist within government departments. But they are more often than not ignored, misunderstood and invisible. Under these circumstances, research is focusing on the conditions of emergence of these innovations, the actors who initiate them, the levers that favor their adoption and/or rejection, the transformations they induce, their durability, and their possible diffusion beyond their initial context.

These innovations are located at the heart of the functioning of state professions, their routines and the frequent ambient deprivation, and are adapted to local and professional contexts, unlike most programs and protocols introduced by technical and financial partners. But they can also modify the latter to make them more realistic and more compatible with everyday practices in the “real world”. We must therefore take into account “creative adaptations”, when public actors adjust “top-down” reforms (coming from the State, partners or both) to concrete working conditions, even if this means modifying existing measures, standards or perimeters, or supplementing them with personal initiatives.

When we speak of innovations in this context, we are in fact referring to all initiatives taken by public players to improve the quality of service delivered to citizens: developing a new protocol, initiating a reform of service organization, providing a better welcome, preventing stock-outs, repairing equipment, modifying hierarchical decisions or TFP projects to make them suitable for staff or users, simplifying bureaucratic processes or computer programs, troubleshooting or explaining, reducing or eliminating informal payments... These initiatives are often nothing spectacular, informal, “do-it-yourself work”. But listening to the countless criticisms voiced by citizens about the behavior of public servants is enough to appreciate the true value of these day-to-day adjustments that lead to better services.

The texts in this issue are clearly along these lines. The articles show how: 1) in Burkina Faso, new technologies, based on local initiatives, are used in health systems to keep dedicated services running; 2) in Cameroon, a police officer rigorously regulating road traffic offers an alternative image to the very negative one usually portrayed by the police; 3) in Niger and Benin, in their day-to-day work in health facilities, grassroots players develop personal innovations and adapt imported reforms through creative strategies to improve service delivery; 4) in Mali, through the initiatives of a mayor, the municipal space has become a framework for permanent exchange and debate, inspiring the confidence of the population and enabling them to support proposed initiatives and collect taxes;

5) and in Burkina Faso, precarious neighborhoods have become spaces for innovative action in the water sector, with the emergence in situ of contextual experts, the collective dynamics of the actions undertaken and the question of their dissemination beyond their site of identification.

All the articles in this issue are part of the same difficult quest: how to overcome colonial legacies and dependence on Western aid, how to transform African administrations to put them at the service of populations and adapt them to complex local contexts? The aim is to make the most of results already achieved, initiate debate and promote new research programs.

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