

## Research Project

### Life in the West African Savannah since the 1970s: Hegemony and autonomy

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Life in the West African Savannah since the 1970s: Hegemony and autonomy

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**Organisation / Research unit**

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Over the past decades, life in Africa underwent dramatic changes. Whilst the first two decades after independence were still informed by narratives of hope and promises of a better future, the economic crises and the incisive Structural Adjustment Programmes at the end of the 1970s ushered a new era of what was later labelled as “the lost decade”. Since then, many African countries lurched from one crisis to the next. Even stronger states as Côte d’Ivoire – once the “African miracle” – experienced severe downturns that led into prolonged crises and eventually into a decade of rebellion and civil war. However, the decades after 1980 were not merely a time of decline and muddling through – as some analysts claim –, they were also and sometimes even predominantly a time of social and political reconfiguration which lead many Africans to remodel their own future. Côte d’Ivoire’s northern savannahs are no exception: when the post-colonial state weakened, local communities began to contest its hegemony; their repression and exclusion from political participation. They increasingly sought for more autonomous forms of social organisation.

This transformation continues to affect all spheres of life, in particular social organisation at the local level. Acephalous forms of social structuration resurface in many rural areas, but to some extent also in urban neighbourhoods where neither state nor rebel governance delivered what the populace expected. In other places, stronger regimes could establish themselves, building on state as well as non-state repertoires of governance. Today, different and often diverging forms of social organisation and governance co-exist, which allows ordinary people to situate themselves in a context of their choice.

The *longue durée* of these social and political transformations has been documented by Till Förster since 1979 when he began to conduct field work in the area on a regular basis. Building on a total of nine years of field research that also include the military insurgency 2002–2011 and its aftermath, this project aims at answering three related questions that are central to understand these transformations:

- How do individual and collective actors relate to each other and structure the social?
- How do diverging social and political regimes articulate to each other?
- What can we learn from these transformations with regard to social and political theory?

The project is sub-divided into two parts: Part I covers the scholarly dimension by elaborating on the theme of hegemony and autonomy. This part is the subject of the SNSF application for funding. Part II narrates the the visual dimension of these transformations on the basis of the applicants photographic archive collected since 1979. This part is the subject of a separate application for funding related to an exhibition and catalogue at the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the Fotomuseum Museum Winterthur that will also travel to African partner institutions.

Part I Hegemony and Autonomy (SNSF funding) has two aims: a) the descriptive conflation and analysis of ethnographic findings from 1979 through the present, and b) their scrutinisation within the larger

framework of social and political theory. Three Work Packages will I make older ethnographic data accessible. A student assistant is needed for this part. WP II fills minor research gaps by two short fieldtrips to trace social change into the present. This supplemental research will be conducted in the places where field work was already conducted since the 1970s, based on the Emic Evaluation Approach as strictly inductive methodology that has been adopted successfully in several SNSF-funded research projects on violent conflicts in Africa since about two decades. WP III consists of deskwork and regular exchanges with eminent scholars in the field but mainly of conceiving and writing a comprehensive book relevant to general debates in theories of social change. For this part, an experienced scientific collaborator is needed who can also teach and publish together with the applicant.

The project is embedded in an international network of research partnerships. African partners are three regional universities (Korhogo, Bouaké, Bobo Dioulasso), other international partners come from the AEGIS network in Europe. Established partnerships also exist with Harvard University, Dartmouth College, Stanford University, Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne and the IDS at the University of Sussex.

**Keywords** governance, politics, segmentary social order, acephalous societies, social change

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