What it makes clear is the right frightening, image of the continent. Are the causes of this crisis to be found in Africa’s place in the world economy or in the continual disorder which afflicts the continent? Is the present turmoil a temporary setback or has it become a permanent condition? Why is there such breakdown of society? Will the present efforts for democratization ensure an improvement in the living conditions of the vast majority or merely benefit the elites? Has the continent been ‘left behind by the rest of the world’, as some have argued? Taken together, these issues raise the more general question of modernization.

Events in Africa over the last two decades have puzzled many. Worsening poverty, corruption, as well as the repeated occurrence of coups or extreme civil violence, all contribute to the right frightening image of the continent. Are the causes of this crisis to be found in Africa’s place in the world economy or in the continual disorder which afflicts the continent? Is the present turmoil a temporary setback or has it become a permanent condition? Why is there such breakdown of society? Will the present efforts for democratization ensure an improvement in the living conditions of the vast majority or merely benefit the elites? Has the continent been ‘left behind by the rest of the world’, as some have argued? Taken together, these issues raise the more general question of modernization.

The chief challenge facing the analyst of contemporary Africa is to explain how the continent can be both ‘modern’ and underdeveloped – that is, what modernization might mean in a context where there is no development as is normally understood in the West. What we observe in Africa is paradoxical from this point of view: nowhere else is the juxtaposition of the obviously ‘traditional’ with the patently ‘modern’ more striking. Africans are not slow in adopting the latest technological aids, computers or mobile phones, but at the same time they seem locked into what outsiders all too readily tend to see as ‘backward’ or traditional psychological constructs – such as ethnicity or witchcraft. Above all, their governments seem unable, or unwilling, to devise and implement policies favouring sustained economic growth. There is no development, as it is commonly understood in the West.

What is modernization? The common assumption of existing paradigms in the social sciences is that modernization is the coherent outcome of the process of developing its own type of modernity, based on an equally pervasive admixture of engineering sophistication, business acumen and organizational capability. What is noteworthy about Africa is that modernization has not engendered the same forward movement, in terms of economic progress, as in Europe, America or the Far East. The continent appears to have evolved a form of modernity which provides for the ability both to utilize the implements (technological and scientific) of Westernization and to remain obstinately ‘traditional’ in what we would qualify broadly as social and cultural terms. What is more, there is scarcely any evidence that the use of ‘modern’ technological instruments has Westernized more likely. The reverse seems to be true – as though Western modernity was being Africanized.

Politics in Africa

This approach helps us to understand a world in which politics, for example, is driven by considerations that range from the most directly contemporary to the most obviously archaic.1 What makes it clear is that, far from behaving randomly or irrationally, African political actors make sound and shrewd instrumental use of the different registers available to them. They must draw two complementary logics bind the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ in Africa today. The first consists in what can be called the re-Africanization of Western concepts or customs according to local socio-cultural circumstances.2 This has led to an evolution of African political institutions and political actions by more informal and personalized (infra-institutional) African codes of practice.3 The second means in a context where there is no legitimacy in this respect and it is of far greater consequence in Africa than it is in Britain.4 Though it is fair to say that, since our notion of ‘traditional’ politics is being more and more subject to the pressure of the West, it is difficult at this stage to derive precisely in which ways the West will eventually differ from the West.

Understanding ‘disorder’

Such an analytical framework makes it clear why Africa’s present modernity encourages the creative use of the ‘traditional’. To put it another way, the continent is not ‘modern’ in the way it is understood in the West, so it is not to imply that this approach is outdated. Although careful attention is needed to the political significance of culture, it is not to say that politics in Africa is to be explained solely in cultural terms. Ethnicity is, in this way, not to be considered as a national, or even by considerations that range from the chaos or anarchy, we establish the foundation on which the continent might be modernizing (meaning backward) than others. Rather it is the much more pertinent fact that being ‘traditional’ in this way, the resort to ethnicity may appear to us to be inconsistent to defer to the demands of witchcraft in this village. 5 African leaders, for example, may well combine the most modern political techniques with a consultation of their village ancestors (buy raw the local medium). 6

Notes

1. This article has been adapted from ideas presented in my latest book: Patrick Chabal & Jean-François Bayart, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).
2. To take but one example, an African academic with an American PhD in engineering will not find it inconsistent to defer to the demands of witchcraft in this village.
3. African leaders, for example, may well combine the most modern political techniques with a consultation of their village ancestors (buy raw the local medium).
7. Though it is fair to say that, since our notion of the modern is very clearly determined by the experience of the West, it is difficult at this stage to derive precisely in which ways the West will eventually differ from the West. Patrick Chabal is a professor of Anthropology and Social and Cultural Analysis at the London School of Economics. He is the author of several books, the most recent of which is Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument.
8. E-mail: patrick.chabal@kcl.ac.uk