

**Research workshop “The African Union and unbridled militarization?**

**New approaches to African peace and security governance”**

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**Trying to understand the implementation of APSA, or the lack thereof.**

**Going beyond notions of “African security culture”**

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## 1 Introduction

In academic debate, progress in the implementation of the African peace and security architecture (APSA), or lack thereof, usually is being discussed in terms of the “African security culture”. In this paper, first, I am asking what exactly this concept entails, how it has been applied, and what source material is being used to demonstrate its utility. Second, this overview is followed by a short critique of the concept “African security culture”, i.e. how of the concept’s core features norms and the degree of their realization contribute to a better understanding of peace and security governance in Africa. Third, and going beyond the concept’s rather narrow focus, I argue that an alternative and more promising perspective for understanding the dynamics that have been unfolding since the adoption of the *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council* (PSC Protocol)<sup>1</sup> in 2002 can be taken. In this respect, both the sociology and anthropology of international organizations are seen as promising avenues to generate more detailed knowledge about the contestation and change in African peace and security practices and narratives. Based on very few well-documented cases from the Union’s work, it is suggested in this paper to employ more long-term and embedded research methods, and to focus more closely on organisational interests, bureaucratic routines as well as peace and security discourses.

## 2 The “African security culture” debate

Initially, and rather optimistically, the complex APSA was meant to be implemented by 2010. After several implementation roadmaps have passed,<sup>2</sup> substantial elements of the architecture – the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Panel of the Wise, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), and the Peace Fund – have been put into place.<sup>3</sup> However, the regional brigades of the African Standby Force (ASF) are still in different states of readiness for action (e.g. the northern and central brigades, NARC and ECCAS respectively, are still not fully operational). In this context, the notion of “fully operational” is somewhat underdetermined when considering the still existing challenges of coordinating and harmonizing APSA between the various departments of the African Union Commission (AUC), the AUC and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) / Regional Mechanisms for

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<sup>1</sup> African Union 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For the latest 2016-2020 Roadmaps see African Union 2016a and 2016b.

<sup>3</sup> IPSS 2017.

Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (RMs), and the eight officially recognised RECs/RMs.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, academic assessments of the pace of the implementation of APSA – and the complementary African Governance Architecture (AGA) that is based on the 2007 *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*<sup>5</sup> – regularly have made reference to an “African security culture”. In the following, a more detailed look will be taken at the definition of the concept, and the ways it has been applied.

The argument on the “African security culture” has been prominently developed in a number of articles by US political scientist Paul D. Williams (\*1948) who is based at the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University, Washington DC. By developing the notion of “security culture”, he makes reference to a longer disciplinary tradition of looking at the role of “culture” in politics.<sup>6</sup> Writing in 2007 against neo-realist approaches to the study of international organizations, and developing a constructivist perspective on the issue, Williams argues that

*despite a growing body of scholarship emphasizing the importance of cultural norms in understanding state security policies, relatively little work has been undertaken that examines the impact of cultural norms on Africa’s security dynamics.*<sup>7</sup>

In his analysis, Williams looks at two cases, so-called unconstitutional changes of governments (UCGs) and humanitarian interventions based on an African version of the responsibility to protect (R2P) discourse, i.e. “non-indifference”.<sup>8</sup> Considering these two

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<sup>4</sup> For an early assessment of the challenges see AU PSC 2006. See also Engel 2013 and 2016. The eight officially recognised RECs are the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA).

<sup>5</sup> African Union 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Originally developed in a structural functionalist environment, see Almond and Verba 1963. A more general “culture of conservatism” at the AU is attested by Welz (2014). It is allegedly preventing deeper levels of continental integration; it is explained by the “unwillingness [of AU member states, UE] to cede sovereignty, an unwillingness of national leaders to give up personal power, a lack of capacities and resources, as well as the fact that regional economic communities ... are often more beneficial for its member states than the AU” (Welz 2014: 5).

<sup>7</sup> Williams 2007: 255. He has developed his argument with reference to the by now classic literature of the 1990s on norms in IR, including Klotz (1995), Katzenstein (1996), Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Risse (1999), and Wheeler (2000) – see his footnote 9.

<sup>8</sup> Williams 2007: 255. See OAU 2000, §§4h and 4p (by the way, Williams refers to the “AU Charter” when actually meaning the *Constitutive Act*).

policies as the major innovations of the African Union as compared to its predecessor, the Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU), Williams argues:

*I submit that the AU is currently involved in what Amitav Acharya has called the process of norm localization ... An awareness of this process helps account for the fact that although the two transnational norms examined here (intolerance of unconstitutional changes of government and the responsibility to protect) have been institutionalized in the AU Charter and endorsed by the United Nations (UN), they have been internalized unevenly by the AU's member states.<sup>9</sup>*

According to Williams,

*Security cultures are patterns of thought and argumentation that establish pervasive and durable security preferences by formulating concepts of the role, legitimacy and efficacy of particular approaches to protecting values. Through a process of socialization, security cultures help establish the core assumptions, beliefs and values of decision-makers about how security challenges can and should be dealt with.<sup>10</sup>*

Moreover, to Williams the African Union's "security culture" is to be found "in the documents and statements of the AU and its officials", as expressions of "collective identity, solidarity and what counts as appropriate and legitimate conduct".<sup>11</sup> And, finally, for him "security culture" represents "a variety of interlocking beliefs that manifest themselves as behavioural norms. Norms are standards of right and wrong which proscribe certain activities and legitimate others."<sup>12</sup>

Basically, the African Union security culture is seen as a progression of the OAU's security culture that had developed between 1963 and 2001.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the two case studies on UCGs and quasi-R2P, and based on an analysis of AU documents such as decisions of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government as well as PSC pronouncements, Williams finally concludes: "To date [2007], however, [these norms, UE] have been internalized

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<sup>9</sup> Williams 2007: 256. On "norm localization" Williams seizes on Acharya 2004, see his footnote 10.

<sup>10</sup> Williams 2007: 256 (my emphasis). His notion of culture draws on Johnston (1995) who has worked on "strategic culture", see his footnote 12 (see also footnote 16 in this text).

<sup>11</sup> Williams 2007: 257.

<sup>12</sup> Williams 2007: 258. This part of the argument is based on Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein (1996), see his footnote 18.

<sup>13</sup> Williams 2007: 266.

unevenly by African states”.<sup>14</sup> So despite the activities of various African “norm entrepreneurs” both at the level of the AU Commission and member states, norm internalization is incomplete. Therefore, “the AU and its member states remain engaged in a process of norm localization.”<sup>15</sup> Having said so, Williams calls for more in-depth research into the subject matter.

The conceptual ideas on “African security culture” Williams has laid out in the 2007 *African Affairs* article in great detail, are continued in further articles (one actually on the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS), some of which he has co-authored with others.<sup>16</sup> The notion of “security culture” has also been taken up by colleagues that discuss the development of security regionalism in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in this case in particular by Francois Vreÿ (Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa, at Stellenbosch University) and Paul-Henri Bischoff (Political and International Studies, at Rhodes University).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, and with some variations, use has also been made of the concept in research on the African Union’s policy on Libya 2011, or its contemporary interaction with other regionalisms.<sup>18</sup>

### **3 A brief critique of the “African security culture” approach**

The focus of Williams and others on norms, beliefs and values has certainly brought new ideas to the debate on peace and security in Africa, stemming from what by now has become a conventional wisdom of “moderate” IR constructivism. Generally speaking, this is a

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<sup>14</sup> Williams 2007: 278.

<sup>15</sup> Williams 2007: 278f. The notion of “norm entrepreneurs” refers to Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

<sup>16</sup> See Williams 2014. On ECOWAS see Williams and Haacke 2008; and Taylor and Williams 2008. The former is grounding the notion of culture not only in Johnston (1995), but also in the writings of the US anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) (Williams and Haacke 2008: 129); the latter with reference to the “standards, beliefs and principles” of West African elites. This culture is described as “neopatrimonial” in nature (Taylor and Williams 2008: 137). Interestingly, with regard to other world regions it rather seems that the term “conceptions and practices” of security is used, as opposed to “security culture” (see Aris and Wegner 2014). It is also noteworthy that in a different context, on the African Union and responsibility to protect (R2P), Williams has made no reference to “security culture” whatsoever (Williams 2009).

<sup>17</sup> On SADC see Bischoff 2012 and 2014 (both emphasizing the importance of the legacy of the liberation struggles in the region and a decoupling of security and development policies); Vreÿ 2009a (on a narrower notion of a common SADC “strategic culture” that is linked to an alleged process of “militarisation” within the region) and Vreÿ 2009b (on “security culture”).

<sup>18</sup> See Reinhold 2013 (in line with Acharya 2004, though with a broader notion of the term “security culture”); and Sicurelli 2013 (on the emerging “security culture” of the African Union and the role of the European Union and the PR China in this process, and the notion of “security culture” based on Williams 2007), respectively.

welcome and important trend – because to a large extent, so far the general debate has tended to be fairly descriptive, if not prescriptive and normative (of course, there are also other relevant theory-informed debates on peace and security in Africa, for instance on “security communities” and “security regimes”, but with a view to “regime complex” or “securitization” theory).<sup>19</sup>

Yet by default, to some extent the insights produced by this scholarship (not to speak of the vast majority of non-theoretical contributions to the general debate) still remain at the surface of things. True, the lack of domestication of many norms adopted at continental level has been identified as a crucial problem; and there is a general sense that a better understanding of decision-making at the Union (and the RECs) is desirable. But, by and large, both the descriptive accounts of AU politics as well as the “African security culture” school have been unable to account for the late, or uneven, implementation of AU decisions, including for the way that the APSA is being implemented, or not.

In more general terms this draws attention to the fact that despite of more than 15 years of scholarship on the African Union, there are very few in-depth insights into decision-making processes, the day-to-day activities of the various AU organs, or detailed accounts of how differences of interest among AU member states regarding specific policy issues are being reconciled.<sup>20</sup> So, at the end of the day, there is still surprisingly little knowledge available on the interests of AU member states, RECs or the various parts of the AU Commission (whether framed in neo-realist or in constructivist terms), and their mediation. Essentially, the internal rules, the daily routines and practices within the Union, and also the unintended side-effects of these activities, still constitute an academic *terra incognita*. In international comparison, far less is known about the workings of the African Union than, for instance, the life of the United Nations or the European Union. But, arguably, this situation may be quite similar to knowledge floating on other regional organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

Basically, I would argue, there are two reasons for this state of affairs. Partly, it is because of the lack of proper sources readily available to researchers. Most of the studies on the African Union are based on a more or less detailed scrutiny of Assembly and AU Executive Council (i.e. foreign ministers) documents, that is the official decisions published on the Union’s

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<sup>19</sup> See the respective introductions to Engel and Gomes Porto 2010, and 2013.

<sup>20</sup> For more solid attempts at trying to explain decision-making see, for instance, Tiekou 2004; Kane 2008; Maluwa 2012; and Aning 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See Engel et al. 2016.

website (often many weeks after the respective summits have been held), as well as the communiqués and press statements coming from the PSC. This in itself, of course, is a major improvement when compared to the situation during the times of the OAU when it was extremely difficult to get hold of any of these decisions.<sup>22</sup> However, in contrast to the system of the United Nations or the European Union, at the AU there are no minutes or verbatim records published on any of the meetings (though, starting in 2013, at least a limited number of PSC sessions have been opened to international partners). Thus, the interested research community can only speculate about the interests articulated by the various parties during these deliberations. In this respect, a culture of closed door consensus-reaching and lack of transparency characterizes Union decision-making.

The lack of proper sources, or in this case more precisely news reports, can also be observed at the level of single AU member states. Only very rarely issues that are negotiated at the Union make it to the papers, broadcasting stations or national parliaments. In most member states newspapers do not regularly report on Union matters. Hence, only infrequently does one learn about member states' interests, positions or tactics.<sup>23</sup> The same holds true for the position of the RECs. So in addition to non-transparent decision-making, there is lack of public debate on Union matters in AU member states. Few exceptions prove the rule, for instance the debate about how member states should relate to the International Criminal Court (ICC) after the indictment of the Kenyan president and his deputy, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto respectively, in 2011.<sup>24</sup> In fact in some member states' lively public debates emerged on this issue, particular in South Africa after the Sudanese president Omar Hasen Ahmad al-Bashir, who already was indicted by the ICC in 2009 (and again in 2010), was allowed to participate in the 25<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly held in Johannesburg on 14-15 June 2015 and, despite the fact that local courts had ordered his arrest, was helped by the South African authorities to be secretly smuggled out of the country.<sup>25</sup>

But partly, and this is the second reason for the deplorable state of affairs, general insights from global research on international organizations and related methods have not yet been

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<sup>22</sup> In those days the voluminous *Africa Contemporary Record* made an effort to publish at least some of the most important OAU decisions. See Legum 1968ff.

<sup>23</sup> One indicator is the last 15 volumes of the Africa Research Bulletin (Political, Cultural and Social Series), see ARB 2002-2017.

<sup>24</sup> See the decisions taken at an AU Extraordinary Assembly in 2013 (AU Assembly 2013).

<sup>25</sup> See Mail & Guardian 2015a and 2015b.

fully applied to the study of the African Union or the RECs/RMs. This argument will be developed further in the following section of the paper.

#### **4 Sketching an alternative research perspective**

There are a few, but important exceptions to the picture portrayed in the section above which all show that a different kind of scholarship on the African Union is possible. For instance, on the work of the AU Panel of the Wise (launched in December 2007), in 2016 João Gomes Porto, who has been working with the Union's Peace and Security Department (PSD) for many years, and Kapinga Yvette Ngandu, who heads the AU PSD's Secretariat of the Panel, have tabled a very detailed history of the Panel and provided rich insights into its activities, in particular on its various missions conducted in 2011-2013 that haven't received much attention elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in 2014 and 2016 political scientist Heidi Hardt, who is with the Institute of Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California at Irvine, CA, has published granular, interview-based accounts of the conflict of interest between the Permanent Representatives accredited to the African Union in Addis Ababa and the AU Commission.<sup>27</sup> In addition, in recent years a number of so far unpublished PhDs dissertations have convincingly shown that by working with the AU Archives in Addis Ababa, and also by conducting expert interviews with AU Commission personnel as well as other actors, one could develop forms of in-depth analysis that come closer to the intra-organizational dynamics around AU decision-making and AUC/member states' interests.<sup>28</sup>

All three examples indicate what kind of scholarship might help to address the open questions detailed in section 3 of this paper. In fact, more conceptually speaking a combination of approaches towards the study of the sociology and the anthropology of international organizations seems to be very fruitful. The first line of scholarship is associated with the work of Michael N. Barnett (\*1960), currently the Stassen Chair of International Affairs at the Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. He looks at international organizations as bureaucracies that constitute "generic cultural forms" which shape their behaviour and provide an explanation for some unintended outcomes. For instance, in an article co-authored with fellow political scientist Martha Finnemore (\*1959,

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<sup>26</sup> Gomes Porto and Ngandu 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Hardt 2014 and 2016.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Witt 2016 on UCGs, and Wondemagegnehu 2016 on the AU/UN partnership.

International Affairs and Political Science at George Washington University) he argues: “Even when they lack material resources, [international organizations] exercise power as they constitute and construct the social world”.<sup>29</sup> This power is said to come from at least two sources: “(1) the legitimacy of the rational-legal authority they embody and (2) control over technical expertise and information”.<sup>30</sup> Through classifying the world, fixing meanings of the social world and diffusing norms this power translates into specific bureaucratic and organizational cultures and practices that may even hinder effective policy implementation. Against this background, Barnett and Finnemore talk about the irrationality of rationalization, bureaucratic universalism, the normalization of deviance, insulation, and cultural contestation.<sup>31</sup> Their emphasis on shared values, norms, roles, and expectations follows the symbolic school on culture, as represented by US anthropologist Clifford Geertz.<sup>32</sup>

By the same token, the anthropologist Séverine Autesserre (\*1976), who is a professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, in a monograph on universal international practices in peacebuilding, demonstrates how valuable it can be to study “the practices, habits, and narratives that shape international efforts on the ground” (in fact, often with counterproductive consequences).<sup>33</sup> Her work draws attention to the effects of

*standard practices (routine activities that are socially meaningful and have an unthought character), shared habits (automatic responses to the world), and dominant narratives (stories that people create to make sense of their lives and environments).*<sup>34</sup>

In combination, investigations on the sociology and the anthropology of the African Union as an international organization are most likely to advance current levels of knowledge if geared towards organisational interests, bureaucratic routines as well as peace and security discourses. However, these investigations also require a long-term interest of the researcher and usually don't easily lend themselves to one-off peer-reviewed journal publications; these kind of publications also imply access to oral and written sources (and, yes, they do exist

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<sup>29</sup> Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 700.

<sup>30</sup> Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 707.

<sup>31</sup> Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 710-715.

<sup>32</sup> See Allaire and Firsirotu 1984; and Geertz who defines culture as “... the fabric of meanings in terms of which human beings interpret their existence and guide their action” (1973: 145).

<sup>33</sup> Autesserre 2014: 3.

<sup>34</sup> Autesserre 2014: 13.

outside the AU website), and generally would favour an approach of working closely with the institution.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, first, I interrogated the prominent concept of “African security culture” and its contribution to better understanding the internal dynamics of the African Union and progress, or lack thereof, in the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture. Second, a few points of critique were developed with regard to this concept: As much as the constructivist ideas coming with it have introduced an interesting theoretical dimension to the debate on peace and security in Africa, they, too, fail to account for the late, or uneven, implementation of AU decisions, the general pace of implementing APSA, and how the interests of the AU Commission, the RECs or AU member states are playing out. Third, and alternatively, a combination of the sociology and the anthropology of international organizations has been suggested, in order to go beyond the levels of scholarship achieved so far. This approach would privilege the analysis of organisational interests, bureaucratic routines as well as peace and security discourses through field work, including making use of the AU Archives and conducting in-depth interviews with AU and member states’ officials.

In conclusion, after 15 years of academic reasoning about the African Union and its twin architectures on peace and security on the one hand, and democracy, elections and governance on the other, it is time to go beyond the vast majority of fairly superficial, descriptive or even prescriptive accounts, and try to get closer to an understanding of what is “really” happening at the African Union. There is little reason why approaches and methods that have successfully been used in the study of the United Nations or the European Union couldn’t be applied with similar gains in the case of the African Union.

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