Still ‘agency in tight corners’? Analytical notes on African agency in international politics

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Abstract
This paper considers some of the substantive and theoretical issues raised by the issue of African agency in international relations. The paper begins with a schematic outline of some contemporary contexts within which questions of African agency in international politics have come to the fore. For each we are faced with a sense of a renewed level of activism by African political actors, but one that is still tightly constrained by historically-shaped structures of uneven development. Nevertheless, the substantive analytical questions that are raised clearly point to a need to engage conceptually and analytically with a range of different agencies at work within the broadly-drawn canvas of the continent’s international relations. While the notion of ‘African agency’ has featured now and then within historical and cultural studies of Africa, particularly relating to colonialism, there is much less in the field of Africa’s international relations. The paper draws selectively on some elements of the wider IR literature on agency to suggest some tentative ideas on how a study of African agency in international relations might be framed. Specifically, the paper suggests that not only are the varied structural contexts within which agencies exist important but so too the temporal aspects to agency. In addition, the paper reaffirms that contrary to many accounts of contemporary international relations, state sovereignty continues to play a fundamental role in differentiating ‘state-based’ agency/cies from other political actors. However, neither agents nor their social contexts can be understood without a carefully balanced historical account.

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1. Introduction

In his introduction to a retrospective special issue on the work of Terrence Ranger, John Lonsdale wrote of how Ranger’s work introduced us to ‘morally determined, intellectually convinced, pioneers of a new Africa’, who exercised their agency ‘in tight corners’ (Lonsdale 2000: 6). In considering the agency of African political actors in contemporary international politics we are in many ways still engaged in analysing the interplay between the makers of history and the tight corners from which they originate and within which they operate. Indeed, much of the seminar series on African Agency has been concerned with evaluating the extent of and constraints on that agency.

However, in order to develop a more systematic analysis of African agency, this paper argues that we need to pay closer attention to two key dimensions: the notion of an ‘African agency’ itself, and the historical production of that agency. The issue of agency is of course key, but much of the discussion of African agency so far has relied on a fairly rough, rule of thumb notion akin in many respects to Buzan’s view of agency as ‘the faculty or state of acting or exerting power’ (Buzan, et al 1993: 103; cited in Wight 1999: 126). This paper follows Colin Wight and others in arguing that we need to be more precise than this. Indeed, as we’ll see in the next section, the studies of ‘African agency’ in the seminar series have highlighted the varieties of agencies at work within the broad sweep of Africa’s international relations. Furthermore, attempting greater precision in discussion of agency also allows us to start to identify different kinds of agents, and in particular what is distinctive (if anything) about state-based agency.

However, as I will argue below, analysing agency in the contemporary period entails being attuned to the temporal dimensions of agency, particularly the historical context which shapes both the opportunities for action as well as the structural constraints which continue to impinge on today’s agents. In fact, it is in historical and historically-oriented cultural studies literatures that notions of African agency have been present for some time, as Lonsdale’s overview made clear (within IR there is very little discussion of African agency per se, though there are of course in IR, and in wider social sciences, many discussions of agency in more general terms). But a historically-informed understanding of African agency does demand that we attend to some similar tensions between abstraction and analytical generalities on the one hand, and the complexities of ‘reality on the ground’ on the other, that discussions of agency raise. In particular, grasping the ways in which historical development shapes today’s conjuncture asks us to make careful balances between broad narrative sweeps and empirical detail.

In the paper I address these issues in the following way. First, in a review of some of the key contributions to the African agency series, I suggest a ‘scoping of the field’ identifying some of the key substantive issues and analytical questions that we need to address. Second, I draw selectively on the literature to outline some ideas on how we might frame an understanding of agency in international relations which allows us to place the different dimensions and forms of agencies in some kind of relation to each other. Third, I draw inspiration from some of the challenges faced by Africanists and historians to suggest some tentative outlines that might help us consider the historical context within which African agency today needs to be placed.
2. Scoping the field

Over the past decade, African states have become increasingly prominent actors in international politics, evident in their role in international trade negotiations, processes governing the distribution of aid and discussions over climate change, as well as military and humanitarian intervention. African governments and non-state actors have responded to changing international circumstances (the rise of China, increasing economic integration) with renewed diplomatic and political activity on world and regional stages. In a more indirect way, social processes shaped by African actors (both state and non-state) are generating new areas of interdependence between the continent and outside powers in the form of 'new' transnational security issues - migration, environmental degradation and health among them.

The ESRC seminar series on African agency has addressed two key questions. First, what is the extent of African agency and varieties of agencies at work in international politics and what are the sources and constraints on that agency/agencies? And second, what are the analytical and theoretical implications for International Relations of a study of African agency? In doing this, the series sought to begin to overturn the conventional approach to understanding Africa in international relations (which asks how external actors and events impact upon the continent) by asking instead how rising African activism in international politics impacts upon the international system including the policies and decision-making processes of western powers and international institutions.

Any attempt to define a field described as broadly as this one is bound to run the risk of partiality and over-generalisation. Not least in this respect is the notion of ‘African agency’ itself. As will be obvious, and as becomes very clear in any attempt to delineate a field of enquiry around this issue, speaking of African agency in the singular is at best hazardous. Much of the rest of the paper is concerned with the different ways in which we can speak of African agencies of various kinds and how we might engage in description of some of the arenas within which agency arises, and conceptualisations of different dimensions of agency itself. However, we ought to note here a word on how far we can speak of an ‘Africa’ or ‘African’ dimensions to international politics itself.

To speak of African agency of course is a non-starter if that were taken unproblematically to be a unified political force in international politics. Although having a colonial history is shared among almost all African states, as Harrison argues, even here the diversity of experience and diversity of the impacts of colonialism make this a unity based on the ‘broadest of sweeps’ (2010: p.15). Aside from that, a unity arises in weak form for Harrison from the instances of collective assertion of influence in the international arena, something we will look more at below, but which as Harrison notes, has a patchy record at best (Harrison 2010: 16). The second, stronger form of unity is discursive, in the way that Africa is constructed as an entity both by outsiders and by African political actors and intellectuals (Harrison 2010: 16-17). This arises in particular in the realm of development policy where common problems and solutions are frequently ascribed to ‘Africa’ as a whole.

Assessing African agency at this very generalised level therefore invites analysis of the concrete impact of African states acting collectively in international forums (and the nature of
that collectivity) as well as the extent to which Africa as a category utilised by other actors, creates opportunity or constraint for such African collective or individual state projects; as well as the ways in which African political actors themselves, both state and non-state, utilise the notion of ‘Africa’ as a means to further their actions in the external world.

If that rather rudimentary and perhaps shaky groundwork is accepted, we still nevertheless, need to try to outline more substantively some key parts of the field of social action with which we are concerned. The range of areas over which we consider the issue of African agency is indeed vast. There are at least four broad areas which have been covered in the seminar series. First, and perhaps most prominent are the multilateral arenas of inter-governmental negotiations. Here African states have been making their mark in the WTO, where there is substantial evidence of increased agency in the large number of proposals, chairs of committees, ldc coalitions and delegations involving African states (Lee 2011: 14); in the climate change negotiations where Africa as a block and South Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia in particular, have risen to prominence (Zondi 2011; Hoste 2011; Chevallier 2011); and in the central UN system itself (Zondi 2011).

Second there are the various sets of bilateral relationships African states are engaged in. The most notable, perhaps is in aid relationships where African governments engage donors on an individual basis (although the donors at times act collectively through donor consultative/coordination meetings and the like, it has been a feature of aid relations that recipients rarely do the same) (Fraser 2011). But for some African states like Uganda there are also substantial bilateral discussions that range over a wider range of issues, particularly security and counter-terrorism (Fisher 2011) and many states have engaged in bilateral dealings on trade and climate change outside of, alongside and at times in contradiction to the collective African presence in the multilateral forums (Chevallier 2011).

Third, and overlapping with both of the above, is a set of intra-regional processes and arrangements, most notably the African Union itself which, founded in 2001, has gained a continental and international presence far beyond that achieved by its predecessor the OUA (Zondi 2011; Tieku 2011). This has included the AU role in multilateral negotiations noted above but also an increasing role in responding to conflicts, security problems and processes of military and humanitarian intervention on the continent.

Finally, there are a variety of studies of the role of non-state actors in sub-state arenas but ones which interact, either directly or mediated via their national state, with international organisations and agencies of various kinds. Areas where these issues arise include the ‘new’ ‘security’ issues of environment, health and migration where the role of international and national forces shape and constrain the agencies of particular groups and communities in ways that may both marginalise those agents and undermine successful policy responses (Perera 2011; Hammerstadt 2011; Seckinelgin 2011; Raleigh 2011).

These varied studies raise a whole host of issues to do with agency, but three areas of enquiry are immediately apparent: how we interpret agency and geopolitics; how we understand the role of ‘domestic’ factors in relation to agency, states and leaders; and the relationship of agency and political discourses.
2.1 Geopolitical contexts: polarity, bargaining and acting collectively

A key factor in the opening up of greater space in the international arena for African states’ activism has been the ‘tectonic’ shifts in power at international system level, especially through the impact of new powers on the institutions of international governance. Shifts in polarity – to what Zondi, following Huntington refers to as a ‘uni-multipolar hybrid’ with the USA’s unquestioned military advantage matched by a broader dispersal of economic power (also see Bromley 2009) – have altered the landscape of international governance. For Zondi, ‘The growth of multilateralism in an increasingly multipolar world with the rise of China and India to challenge the north-Atlantic axis has had a positive effect on Africa’s participation in global affairs’ (Zondi 2011: p.4). This has been enhanced further by the rise of more ‘small club diplomacy’ with a multiplication of groupings – BRICs, G20, BASIC and the like – becoming more prominent (Zondi 2011: p.4).

However, as Donna Lee has pointed out, the impact on African activism is not all one-way. On the one hand, renewed activism by African states is both enabled by and contributes to the diffusion of power in multilateral forums. It is enabled by it because in the absence of other means by which the leading economies can dominate multilateral forums, ‘numbers count’ and with 53 states, this gives African states a crucial role (Zondi 2011, Lee 2011). And it contributes to it through further strengthening the influence of developing country groupings, in the WTO-based Group of 20 for instance, and through the role of the ‘cotton club’.

One of the consequences of this dispersal of power in the WTO has been an ‘impasse’ in multilateralism. The absence of hegemonic leadership reflects ‘a complex of numerous sets of strategic alliances that includes perhaps a dozen or so states as major powers with diverse – often conflicting – trade interests in the WTO’ Lee maintains, ‘Put simply, authority and market power in the contemporary global economy is too dispersed to enable member state driven institutions such as the WTO to effectively govern multilateral trade.’ (Lee 2011: p.8-9). The paradox for African states is that such an impasse leaves them with something of a pyrrhic victory, the influence of ‘saying no’ but equally without much prospect that the forum can deliver policy outcomes in the form of a more development-friendly trade regime.

The role of African countries in the WTO, as well as in the climate change arena has also been driven by attempts by African states to utilise its advantage in the numbers game in international forums (Zondi 2011). The results have been patchy. In the case of UN reform, the Africa common position outlined in the Ezulwini Consensus was arrived at through a consensus-forming process that resulted, because of the need to accommodate such disparate interests, into an implausible and inflexible negotiating position that left Africa marginalised in the UN discussions (Zondi 2011: p.9-11). Influence in the Copenhagen negotiations was greater and the common Africa position was a first for the AU (Hoste 2011). But even there the collective position could not withstand the centrifugal pull of national interests, South Africa taking a key role in the drafting of the Copenhagen Accord out-with AU oversight after pre-summit bilateral deals and splits between Ethiopia and Sudan had undermined AU cohesion on the issue (Zondi 2011: p15; Hoste 2011: p.6-7).
These experiences leave serious doubts about the extent to which African states were able and willing to pool sovereignty within the AU and whether common positions that have been arrived at have resulted from pragmatic alliances or a more sentimental notion of continental solidarity (Zondi 2011: p.5). ‘In the end’ Zondi concludes, ‘nation states are reluctant to cede any sovereignty to the organization [the AU] in order to enable it to independently pursue common interests of the continent.’ (Zondi 2011: 17).

Such paradoxes are reflected also in consideration of the rise of new powers in the international system and in Africa. None are more important here than China whose rise has done much to reshape overall polarity in the international system and, together with India and Brazil, in multilateral forums. But China’s role in issues like climate change is potentially double-edged. In giving support to Africa’s common position it enhances the position of African states within the negotiations. As China, the EU and the USA battled it out, having Africa ‘on side’ began to matter more than hitherto. Against this however, China’s success in getting Africa’s numbers lined up behind a negotiating stance (against binding limits on its emissions) which cannot deliver the necessary changes needed to protect Africa from the worst effects of climate change, may leave a more damaging legacy.

Within Africa, the prominence of South Africa as a leading player has continually grown. Through the WTO negotiations and the formation of the common position in the build up to Copenhagen, South Africa confirmed its status as a regional power on the continent and abroad (Hoste 2011: p.6). However, South Africa’s geopolitical role is hedged in on all sides. South Africa’s ability to lead on the climate change issue is constrained both by regional sensibilities (not wanting to overplay its hand in the region) and by the material interests of the country itself. As the biggest emitter in Africa, it is constrained in terms of the negotiating positions it can support without endangering its own economic growth prospects which are highly carbon-intensive (Chevallier 2011). In this case its own interests in the negotiations potentially run counter to some AU states including those who are members of the AOSIS group (Chevallier 2011). In the run up to Durban 2011, the demands on South Africa will only increase, as host the need to get a successful deal of some kind may also impinge on its ability to lead and represent the continent as a whole (Chevallier 2011).

In terms of analysing African agency in today’s international system, several key questions arise. First, what is the relative balance of system-level influences on the extent of African agency (issues like polarity and the rise of new powers and the policies and actions of great powers) as compared to more regional- or country-specific factors affecting bargaining strength (issues like alliance formation, discourse and state capacity). Second, is the impression of increased African agency really just a by-product of the irrelevance of those forums within which it has become prominent – the stalled negotiations around trade and climate change – or is it that impasse that creates an opportunity for lasting influence? Lastly, what potential is there for an African agency based on the pursuit of common interests through the AU as a negotiating block and whether on any issue there is enough genuine coincidence of interest for this to be a viable vehicle to promote African interests in the international arena. If there is not, does an AU-focussed approach that necessarily relies on fudge and compromise, limit the potential role and impact of regional hegemonic powers like South Africa and Nigeria?
2.2 Capacity, leaders, states and society

Informing much of what African states are able to do with those opportunities that do arise within multilateral forums, are a collection of issues more ‘domestic’ in orientation, to do with capacities to act, the dominance of leaders as state agents in the international realm and the wider state-society relationships that both capacity and leadership issues are shaped by.

Geopolitical strength, particularly as translated in the realm of international negotiations, is critically dependent on state capacities and whether African states have the institutional and political strength to effectively consider interests and formulate and articulate policy. Fraser has argued (and Fraser and Whitfield assessed in more depth) that having a strong sense of national interest and the ability to carry that forward has been important in bilateral aid relationships (Fraser 2011; Fraser and Whitfield 2009). In both bilateral aid negotiations and negotiations with multilateral agencies, countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia have both been able to preserve some policy autonomy from donors partly as a result of internal political processes and conditions (Fraser 2011; Whitfield and Fraser 2010; see also Rusagara’s account of Rwandan post-conflict processes). As such, capacity questions here mesh with a series of other internal and external factors that determine recipients’ negotiating strength in aid bargaining, others being wider economic conditions, geopolitical contexts, levels of indebtedness and institutional factors such as the history of relations with donors (Fraser 2011).

Lee also points to capacity questions as exerting a key role in shaping African agency in the WTO. Moves to enhance African state capacity have had some effect, she argues, although ironically this has enhanced African agency through the utilisation of resources of western NGOs and agencies as well as WTO and UN-based support (Lee 2011: p.18). According to one African negotiator quoted by Lee, the effect has been positive: ‘We have learnt to ask why, we have learnt to ask how, and we have learnt to say no.’ (Lee 2011: p.12). However, such presence in WTO negotiations and the impact it has, is nevertheless limited by the wider impasse noted above.

Capacity is also a critical issue for the role of regional organisations. For the AU, its ability to contribute to or lead mediation efforts in conflict resolution would be significantly enhanced with greater institutional capacity and expertise (Tieku 2011). As Tom Tieku argued, the advent of the AU saw regional leadership of negotiations in Burundi improve markedly on the protracted process led by the OAU. Nevertheless the complexities and nuances of such negotiations demand skilled mediators able to draw on substantial expert and institutional back up if the failures of that process are to be overcome (Tieku 2011). John Kabia also highlighted limited funding provided by member states, the level of corruption and the weak economic conditions as factors which undermine the efficacy of regional organisations like ECOWAS (Kabia 2011). Even in Africa’s most developed state, South Africa, concerns arise about its ability to draw on enough expertise to effectively manage and lead the climate change negotiations as chair and host of the Durban 2011 round (Chevallier 2011).

Another key issue raised in a number of cases is the particular role of political leaders in African international relations and both the over-extended role they sometimes play as well
as the considerable domestic and regional political constraints that accompany that form of state-based agency. According to Fisher’s study of Uganda’s foreign policy, Museveni exerts an overbearing influence on the country’s stance, limiting the role of domestic bureaucracy and of non-state Ugandan actors (Fisher 2011). Historic and personal connections between South Africa’s leadership and the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe have long been seen as one of the sources of that country’s ‘softly softly’ stance on the Zimbabwe crisis ([x, y]). Hammerstadt outlines how the standing of South Africa in the region, as well as the leadership’s personal ties to Zimbabwe, constrained South African policy on immigration – a limited room for manoeuvre for this most powerful African state in its domestic affairs which has the knock-on effect of marginalising the political role of Zimbabwean immigrants in the country (Hammerstadt 2011). In turn, in west Africa, inter-personal relationships and alliances shaped the west African response to the crisis in Cote d’Ivoire in 2010-11. Ghanaian support for the incumbent Gbagbo regime and domestic elections in Nigeria and a number of other countries, curtailed the ability of the regional organisation ECOWAS to respond (Kabia 2011and Alaga 2011). Such paralysis in the face of this crisis meant it was left to the UN, and the former colonial power France, to make the decisive move. The record of the AU in relation to the Libyan crisis in 2011 is similarly chequered, where loyalty of some African leaders to the ousted Gaddafi regime stretched the AU’s credibility in the eyes of many outsiders.

Both issues of capacity and the role of leaders raise wider questions about statehood and state-society relationships in African foreign policies. One doesn’t have to sign up to all the arguments about ‘personal rule’ in African politics to see how limited state capacity and underdeveloped bureaucracies combine with a marginalised civil society to allow an autonomy for (or perhaps a dependence on?) state leaders in foreign policy. However, this form of agency comes with its own constraints. The role of ‘personalised’ policy is itself circumscribed by the very personal, political and clientelist relationships that underpin that form of politics itself. […] More generally, limitations on capacity should themselves be seen as one of the products of the particular processes of state formation in the continent, shaped as they are by the complexities and novel social forms thrown up by combined development. […] Limited capacity and the role of leaders as key state-based agents in international politics should not therefore be seen as purely ‘technical’ issues, amenable to a programme of NGO training courses and staff development (though they are that too). More, they are symptoms of the influence of wider social structural factors in shaping how agency in many of the fields we have reviewed is formed, operates and to what ends.

Two key analytical questions that arise therefore include what is the role of ‘structural’ and ‘domestic’ factors in constraining and shaping African agency in international politics both in terms of the kinds of state-based agents who enact that agency as well as the degree of subjective freedom they exploit? and, secondly, how African agency in contemporary international politics is shaped by wider historical social and political processes arising from the particular developmental trajectories of the countries concerned. As noted at the beginning, generalising an ‘African’ experience here may have some utility though the dangers of over-simplification are also great, an issue we’ll return to in Section 4.

2.3 Discourses and issue framing
Finally, political discourses and policy framings are seen to have a bearing on the scope for and character of African agency. Within the multilateral arena, Donna Lee has argued that changes in trade discourse have had a major impact in re-framing the contests within the WTO, African states changing from a ‘crying game’ to a ‘won’t do’ stance: ‘What these states lack in market power, they make up for in discursive power…by developing diplomatic strategies from what some officials in Geneva refer to as a “Crying Game” to reinforce moral appeals to greater fairness in global trade governance to what has been termed a “won’t do” strategy’. (Lee 2011 p.3). The shift in trade discourse at the turn of the century, with the language of development coming much more to the fore, opened a political space for African negotiators in the WTO – ‘The new discourse of legitimacy and fairness has facilitated African activism in the DDA’ Lee concludes (2011: p.16).

In a different context, Jonathan Fisher has analysed how Museveni’s government has pursued an active policy of trying to manage and shape donor perceptions of Uganda, in a way which keeps donors ‘on side’ despite serious misgivings about the domestic political situation in Uganda and the country’s involvement in the DRC conflict (Fisher 2011). As Cargill noted, this has at times been a subtle strategy, presenting different images of Uganda even to different departments of the US government (Cargill 2011). ‘Through managing donor perceptions’ Fisher claims, ‘the Ugandan regime has chosen to subvert the structural logic of aid dependence…’ (Fisher 2011: p.28). However, this strategy relies on two other conditions: that donors are unwilling to impose harsh conditions on countries that are ‘useful’ in other respects, such as in trade or foreign policy; and secondly that limited detailed donor knowledge of recipient countries allows space for such ‘perception management’ (Fisher 2011: p.28).

In several contexts, most notably in health and climate change, the effects of ‘securitising discourses’ have also been hotly debated in terms of their effects on African agency. On the one hand – as argued by Stephan Elbe – securitisation of HIV served to increase funding for HIV programmes and in turn opened up political spaces for African states in high-level meetings once HIV had become an important issue on the international security agenda (Elbe 2011). However, against this, Hakan Seckinelgin argued that such securitisation has a negative impact on vulnerable populations, making policy discussion more top-down, marginalising community-based agencies that need to be empowered for effective HIV programmes to work (2011). Similarly, Clionadh Raleigh argued that discourses of environmentally-driven violence are based on a denial of agency on the part of rural communities vulnerable to climate change. ‘…the relationship between violence and rural vulnerability is both exaggerated and accusatory…’ she maintains, denying the potential of rural communities to react in any other way than with violence to the challenges posed by environmental stress (Raleigh 2011). Moreover the empirical evidence for such a direct link is weak and a clearer focus on the actualities of agency in environmentally-vulnerable communities shows a range of coping mechanisms (Raleigh 2011).

Within the security and health fields, a key issue has been the extent to which framings of policy, by international donors or regional bodies, has the effect of prioritising or marginalising different categories of agent within recipient states. Here, the recognition by outsiders of some actors and not others as agents in a particular policy field, has important
consequences. In the case of ECOWAS, a long-standing emphasis on states and the military, and a policy directed at regime security was only slowly giving way to a focus on human security and the involvement of civil society, particularly women’s organisations in conflict prevention and resolution processes (Kabia 2011, Alaga 2011). In the case of health, Seckinelgin’s study of HIV programmes in Burundi illustrated how focusing on ex-combatants at the expense of other vulnerable groups within communities, particularly women, both reinforced existing processes of marginalisation and undermined the effectiveness of the interventions themselves (Seckinelgin 2011). Here, the dual impact of existing structures of gender relations and the power of external donors serves to constrain agency ‘on the ground’ in important ways (Seckinelgin 2011).

Suda Perera also highlighted the impact of such framings on the agency of refugees, suggesting that the way these groups were conceptualised as agents affected the political response of recipient governments and home governments. Seeing particular groups as ‘warrior refugees’ limited the political roles that were possible for such groups both in terms of gaining eventual citizenship in the host country as well as their potential for return to the home country (Perera 2011).

Several interesting questions are raised by these debates. Most abstractly, what is the standing of such discourses as constraints on agency and what is the role of agency in forming and promoting different discourses and changes therein? (A welcome part of Elbe’s argument is that it is clear that securitising discourses are seen to be promoted by actual political agents for particular reasons so discourses don’t have the kind of free-floating causal role they take in some other accounts.) More prosaically, what room for manoeuvre is there for African agents to change political discourses and policy framings in ways which enhance that agency?

3. Handling agency

As will be clear from this survey, although generating many insights, the term agency has been used in a rather loose, general sense. We have spoken of states and other actors ‘having agency’ within certain forums, with the sense of agency meaning something akin to ‘an ability to act’, ‘influence’ or perhaps ‘power’. As Wight has noted, in much IR literature, this is as far as discussions of agency gets, following something like Buzan’s definition of agency as ‘the faculty or state of acting or exerting power’ (Buzan, et al 1993: 103; cited in Wight 1999: 126). As David Williams has pointed out, in much of the literature, questions of agency focus on the state and how far states can be said to ‘act’ also noting rightly that such questions are general problems in IR, not specific to Africa (Williams 2011). While we will come back to questions of state-based agencies below, Williams’ general point that writers in IR make rather sweeping use of “as if” academic shorthand – we speak of states and other actors ‘as if’ they were agents analogous to individuals – applies equally to much of the discussion of African agency.

The survey above suggests that we may need try to be more precise than this. On the one hand, it is arguable that in descriptions of the potential ‘space’ for African agency arising due to the broad shifts in power and polarity at the international system level, highly abstracted
‘academic shorthand’ (Wight 2006, Williams 2011) may suffice. Any attempt to account for or describe anything requires some form of abstraction and part of Wendt’s justification for speaking of states ‘acting’ is that it seems to describe reasonably accurately what is going on (Wendt 1999; 2004). However, as the discussion above shows, this doesn’t ‘get at’ several key dimensions of ‘African agency’, notably that of sub- or non-state actors nor the particularly forms taken by state-based agency, nor for the most part the analysis of the inter-relations of structures and agency. Nor does it resolve the philosophical problems associated with claiming action and agency on the part of entities that are not simply reducible to the actions of individualised human beings (groups, state structures, corporate entities etc) (Wight 2006, and see below). But perhaps more directly, in building an analysis that is able to accurately describe or explain the extent of and constraints on African agency, we immediately need to move beyond a shorthand. Indeed, unless one sticks to an account that is ‘purely structural’ (a neo-realist account based solely on changing polarity at system level, say), then we are forced to give a more nuanced account that goes beyond such shorthand.

3.1 Dimensions of agency

In the discussion that follows, I draw heavily on (and to a limited extent debate with) Colin Wight’s work to outline in a preliminary way, some pointers as to how we might begin to think about agency that allows for a fuller account of African agency in today’s international politics. Wight has been at the forefront of recent discussions of agency in international politics, engaging with and taking issue with notion of agency arising from the work of Alexander Wendt among others. With (one presumes) the partial exception of Wendt, Wight maintains that ‘I am aware of no systematic [IR] disciplinary treatment of the concept of agency’ (2006: 11). The reason, Wight claims, is down to the importance of the ‘state-as-agent’ idea to the identity of IR as a discipline. If we don’t uphold the idea of the state as an agent, for Wight, the whole notion of IR as a discipline comes into question. Presumably writers prefer to stick to ‘academic shorthand’ and avoid such existential problems? I’m not sure Wight is completely right on this count, though as I argue below, you do need some means of distinguishing states from other entities if we are to avoid the morass of ‘global sociology’.

A guiding notion for Wight is Bhaskar’s claim that ‘nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done’ (cited in Wight 2006: 187). Granting states (or any other structured entities) a personality (as Wendt does, 2004) transgresses on this basic, and widely shared, premise. And while Wight has some sympathy with Buzan’s notion of agency involving ‘acting’ and ‘exerting power’, he argues that this misses key dimensions of what is involved when speaking of agency, particularly the importance of agents’ injection of meaning and intentionality into action (Wight 2004: 274). Instead, Wight offers us a three-fold definition of agency, a rather vulgarised account of which follows.

Wight argues that agency has a tripartite character (Wight 2006, 213-6). First, is the notion of agency in the sense most commonly used, of a ‘freedom of subjectivity’ in action, involving meaning and intentionality (Wight 1999: 126, citing Spivak). This is the irreducibly human aspect to agency and through which ‘anything that happens in society’ must travel. However, this first dimension (what Wight calls ‘agency1’) – the idea of agency as ‘doing something’ – occurs in relation to a second dimension (agency2) more akin to the notion of agency as
‘being an agent of something’. Here Wight seems to have in mind the socio-cultural setting, personal histories, backgrounds and social conditioning, that shape agency\textsubscript{1}. Agency\textsubscript{2} for Wight helps to define ‘the power agents accumulate by virtue of their positioning within a social context’ which varies over time and according to different contexts. Finally, if the second dimension of agency makes agents seen in the first sense ‘bearers’ of the context from which they originate, they are also positioned within particular roles – agency\textsubscript{3} – which may or may not be formally ascribed (the example Wight uses of a diplomat is of course a highly institutionalised role). Any example of agency then has a tripartite character and invocations of agency always involve all three: we have neither simply free individuals (agency\textsubscript{1}) nor defined role performance according to a script (agency\textsubscript{3}) but both roles and subjectivity, with both shaped by and operating within the context of agency\textsubscript{2}. All three need to be considered together according to Wight and the precise way in which they combine cannot be determined abstractly but only in analysis of concrete examples (Wight 1999: 115).

One of the attractive aspects of this orientation towards agency is the way in which it inscribes within the notion of agency itself the wider, structural context within which it occurs. As Wight notes, ‘…we need to think of agency as always structurally embedded yet distinct from those structures that enable and constrain it…’ (Wight 1999: 110). (Rosenberg has made a similar point, claiming that whereas structure is a device for exploring the emergent properties and accumulated practices and consequences of human agency; similarly ‘there is no such thing as ‘extra-structural’ agency’. But the implications cut both ways. ‘To reserve agency only to describe action in opposition to established practice (structure) is to evacuate from the concept of structure exactly that reproductive and sequential agency whose patterns and results the concept [structure] exists to delineate’ (Rosenberg, 2007: 44)). Unlike the more thoroughgoing methodological individualist accounts of international politics (which can be summed up as the argument that if the only agency is human agency then everything can ultimately be reduced to and explained by, the accumulations of individual behaviour) here we have a notion of agency that is structurally embedded. In Wight’s insightful phrase, ‘…agents always bring their structures with them’ (Wight 1999: 110).

However, we can also draw out another layer to the notion of agency, their temporal position. In their sociological discussion of agency, Emirbayer and Mische make the important point that agency is also a temporally-embedded process, any instance also oriented towards past, present and future. As they summarise, agency is, ‘…informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). As such, it is not quite right to see agency as just ‘future-oriented’ nor just about ‘changing the ‘inherited predicament’ as de Bruijn et al have it (2007: p.17) but informed by the past and orientated towards present and future in a way that may be reproductive as much as transformative. Such temporal aspects are important, and not always recognised as fully as they might be but are arguably implicit (but not as far as I can see explicit) within Wight’s conceptualisation.

When looking at any particular instance of African agency, we are therefore called upon to give an account that recognises the subjectivity of the agents concerned but viewed both in the sense of the roles they are performing and the social contextual constraints that inform that subjectivity and constrain its possibilities. In describing different examples of agency –
state leader, diplomat, negotiator, socially-located individuals and groups – part of our account needs to be about the subjectivity involved but also the roles being filled and the socio-cultural contexts which inform and constrain that agency – ‘...the conditions of possibility for any social act...’ as Wight put it (2006: 286). Our understanding of such constraints also need to be historically informed. If ‘Men make their own history’ as Marx’s famous dictum had it, operating within today’s ‘tight corners’ and oriented towards the future, they are also structured by the inheritance of the past. They act ‘not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted’ (1973 [1852], p.146;). Given the importance of historical experiences in the formation of African states and the ways this shapes present day agency, the rider to this famous quote also bears noting: ‘The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’ (see Brown 2006b: x). In accounting for African agency within the contingencies of today’s international system, such historicising of our accounts of that agency remains an important and vital task, an issue I will return to in Section 4.

3.2 States and agency

However, before that, we need to consider what this discussion does for our understanding of the different forms of agency and in particular the differentiation that is needed between state-based forms of agency and the other, non-state forms we have encountered in this discussion. In much of the discussion above, we have talked, in ‘academic shorthand’, of African states having agency. If Wight’s consideration of agency is correct, then, following Jessop, we need to be aware that ‘it is not the state which acts: it is always specific sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state system’ (cited in Wight 2006: 187-8). As a result, Wight argues (contra Wendt) against the notion of the state as an actual person. Wendt argued that states are in fact persons, having a theoretical understanding of their activities; supplying reasons for their behaviour; monitoring and adapting their behaviour and make decisions – a form of ‘collective consciousness’ (Wendt 2004; Wight 2006: 182). The state, as such is a particular type of structure that emerges into an corporate agent because of these features.

Instead, Wight argues there is a distinction to be made (and one Wendt misses) between corporate and collective agency, where the latter is unproblematic (individuals acting collectively and having an often enhanced agency as a result) but which cannot be applied easily to the state. Instead, following Marx, the state is a ‘complex institutional ensemble’ (Wight 2006: 184-5). As a ‘structural ensemble’ the state can have causality and be legally accountable but it is not itself a person (Wight 2006: 194-5). However, while ‘...structures are responsible for some element of agential outcomes’ (Wight 2006: p.196) states exert agency only through the actions of socially-embedded and role-performing groups and individuals: ‘As such, the state itself does not exercise power, but facilitates the exercise of power by state agents...structurally-located political actors...It is only these agents; who bring into play specific powers and state capacities that are inscribed in particular state institutions that act.’ (Wight 2006: p.220). As such, abstracting the state as an agent may work for certain analytical purposes but cannot account for phenomena whose causality resides elsewhere in the social world (2006: p.216-17).
So far, this seems reasonable. However, where we encounter difficulty in Wight’s account, is in differentiating such ‘state-enabled’ agencies from any other. Here Wight’s account seems to me to oscillate between an insistence on the uniqueness of the state, and assertions that there is nothing to distinguish its structures (and hence the agents located within) from any other. Important consequences flow from this, not least whether the distinction between an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in IR any longer obtains. As Wight puts it, ‘…no organisation can be considered wholly autonomous and independent of external structural influences. When applied to the state, this fact alone should lead us to treat with suspicion artificial boundaries separating inside form outside, or dividing the world into artificial levels.’ (p.204)

However, he is more equivocal than this statement implies. On the one hand, ‘although the state plays a unique role in a given society it is not simply one among equals. The state is the pre-eminent institutional structure.’ (p.221) and that ‘…the state is still characterised by its distinctive structural make-up that endows it with a unique set of powers, properties and liabilities’ (p.223). Yet, on the other hand he claims, ‘…the distinction between domestic and international structures seems untenable’ (although he is surely right that, ‘agents are seen to be located within a plurality of structural constraints and enables, some domestic, some international’) (2006 p.292). But then he goes on to say that: ‘States are only one institutional form among many…’ and that we should be analysing ‘global social relations, not international relations, the state system is a (powerful) chimera’ (p.299). In a recent piece, Franke and Roos seem to back Wight up here, arguing ‘…in spite of its longstanding predominance, the state is nothing but one kind of structure of corporate practice among many others within the international realm…” including, they add, international organisations, NGOs and terrorist organisations (Franke and Roos 2010: 1065; emphasis added).

I would argue that the key ingredient that is missing from these claims, and which helps to resolve the specific difference of ‘state-enabled’ agents from others, is sovereignty. Indeed, contrary to the quotes in the preceding paragraph, at one point Wight notes: ‘…sovereignty, as a constitutive rule of international order, is both the medium, and outcome, of the internal and external practices of states. It provides the very meaning of what is internal and what is external and is constitutive of the identities and interests of agents involved’ (p.293). Moreover, in reference to Wight’s earlier point as to the state’s ‘unique powers’ and ‘pre-eminent position’ it is precisely the claim to sovereignty which lies at the heart of this uniqueness.

I have discussed at greater length elsewhere why sovereignty should remain at the heart of any account of Africa’s international relations (Brown, forthcoming; also 2006) but some key points are worth reiterating in this context. Sovereignty should be seen as a claim to the location of ultimate authority, to a socially-recognised right to rule. As such it puts the state, and the agencies who are empowered to act on its behalf, in a class apart from all others in society. Indeed, not only does the state’s imprimatur constrain or enable other embodied agents to act (Wight 2006: p.222) but in enabling state agencies or individuals fulfilling state-based roles to act as state-authorised agents, it endows them with a status and power different from all others. So not only does sovereignty serve to maintain the inside/outside distinction it is also the principle through which states themselves perform their agency, exert power, and play roles internationally through their agents.
Such considerations are crucial to understanding the different forms of African agency. As many have noted, it is international processes of mutual recognition of sovereignty that define the membership of the international ‘club’ of states in the first place and as a result the very rights to attendance and participation in the varied multilateral forums and bilateral relations surveyed in section 2 (for example see Jackson 1990, Clapham 1996, Mayall 199x). Without acknowledging this we simply cannot comprehend African agency in these arenas. In Wight’s terms, it is also sovereignty which defines key aspects of the social location and role-performance of those agents authorised to act on the state’s behalf in these contexts. Indeed, it is as recognised leaders (and hence ‘representatives’) of the state, that leaders are able to claim a right to speak for and on behalf of a particular country. And sovereign authority confers on state agents an ability to recognise or not, give legitimacy or not, to other actors. No non-state actor has this same kind of agency in any of the arenas we have discussed.

That is certainly not to say that non-state actors are irrelevant, far from it. Sovereignty defined in this way is irreducibly relational and highly politicised in many respects (See also Williams 2011). It is based on claims and recognition, and is both historically variable in form and content and an ongoing ‘project’. As Wight notes, ‘There is never a point when the state project is completed within a given territory and thereafter operates according to its own fixed and inevitable logic’ (2006: p.224). Both the form and content of sovereignty, and the uses of sovereign power, are therefore something that are continually made and remade within the broad area of what we might refer to as ‘state-society complexes’ the relations between those claiming sovereign authority and those over whom it is claimed. Nor is the role of non-state agencies, either from within a given state or without it, set in stone by states but is contested and negotiated. It is partly because of these aspects of agency that understanding the role of historical processes in shaping statehood, sovereignty and the relations between states and the societies they govern and represent, is so crucial in understanding the historical processes that shape the forms, extent and constraints on African agency.

4. History and conjuncture

In fact, how we handle history matters for discussions of agency for (at least) three reasons. First, all of the issue areas we have surveyed above demand an account of agency that is historically-informed. Whether talking about the importance and nature of the current international conjuncture, the particular role of leaders as agents of African foreign policies, state capacity, or how processes of discursive change interact with agency, they all require explanations that historicise contemporary conditions. On the one hand, to do otherwise runs the risk of reifying existing patterns of social relations, depicting them as fixed, immutable and unchanging rather than evolving and dynamic. There are already too many accounts of African international relations and African politics more generally that rely on essentialised images and descriptions. On the other hand, explanations of the origins of particular modes of state-based African agencies (the dominant role of leaders, say) and their limitations (such as capacity issues) requires an understanding of their social production, reproduction and transformation over time.
Second, as our discussion of agency in the previous section has shown, not only do accounts of agency require locating the common sense notion of agency as subjective action (Wight’s agency1) in a historically-formed social context (Wight’s agency2), as we have seen, agency also need to be seen in temporal context, informed by the past (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Here history (and our understanding of that history) informs our understanding of the constraints and possibilities on agency today. For African agency, key aspects of such an account include the particular patterns of combined development arising from the uneven and unequal interactions between African societies and powerful external actors that have produced particular forms of state, relations between rulers and ruled and particular configurations of interests at the international level. As de Bruijn et al claim, ‘the agency we find among Africans may differ form that among Europeans because histories are different, cultures vary and social relations are not the same, nor are expectations of the future’ (2007: p.18).

Third, looked at from the other direction, an understanding of agency matters for historical analysis. This has long been recognised in the realm of historical and cultural studies, where there has been a concern with notions of African agency, represented in intellectual efforts to ‘recover the history and agency of the subaltern’ as Cooper puts it (1994: 1517). Early post-independence histories of Africa attempted this through an emphasis on the role of African resistance to colonialism (Cooper 1994: 1520). In historical studies, perhaps ironically, it was some on the radical end of the spectrum, in both dependency and Marxian guises in the 1970s, who often did most to sideline agency of any kind, and that of actors within the developing world in particular, within overly structuralist accounts of the role of the international economy (Cooper 1994: 1524). As Terrence Ranger put it, ‘The African historian…who emphasizes African activity, African adaptation, African choice, African initiative, will increasingly find his main adversaries not in the discredited colonial school but in the radical pessimists’ (cited in Lonsdale 2000: p.7). In more recent times, those Afro-pessimistic accounts which emphasise the over-dominance of international donors and financial institutions to the exclusion of any African agency, or the constraints imposed by unequal relations between ‘North and South’, or the role of a disembodied ‘neo-liberalism’ in determining African outcomes, fall into a similar trap3.

In bringing history into our study of African agency in today’s international politics, we can indeed get some pointers from these longer-standing literatures. In reviewing the debates on colonialism Cooper argued that the challenge was to ‘confront the power behind European expansion without assuming it was all-determining…’ but also to avoid the simplistic inversions of the colonial binaries of civilised/primitive with equally simplistic ones (destructive/sustaining) (Cooper 1994: 1517), finding African agency ‘in all its complexity, contingency and limitations’ rather than the ‘flattening of the complex lives of real people’ (Cooper 1994: 1518). Better ‘historical stories’ (Lawson 200x), Cooper argued, got at some of the ebb and flow of initiative and resistance: not just a story of African resistance to a dominant Europe but of adaptation of European colonial policy to resistance by the colonized4 (Cooper 1994: 1531).

In a similar vein, Mamdani has warned of the need to tread a careful path. If history is presented as a pre-given route ‘unaffected by the struggles that happened along the way’,
both African and the developed world ‘are robbed of their history’ (Mamdani 1996: 10). Moreover, while structuralist accounts ‘straightjacket agency within iron laws of history’ a strong tendency in poststructuralism is ‘to diminish the significance of historical constraint in the name of salvaging agency’ (Mamdani 1996: 10). In some more fanciful post-structuralist versions, African insertion into the world economy, even slavery, is down purely to African initiative. ‘It is one thing to argue that nothing short of death can extinguish human initiative and creativity’ he warns, ‘but quite another to see in every gesture evidence of historical initiative…it is only when abstracted from structural constraint that agency appears as lacking in historical specificity…’ (Mamdani 1996: 10-11).

By articulating an account of agency that is attuned to the mutual constitution of agents and the structures they bring with them, that sees in agency not only the subjectivity and roles it enacts but also the historically-produced social contexts from which it originates, maybe we can begin to try to meet these challenges.

5. Conclusion: still ‘agency in tight corners’?

[In this review of African agency in international politics I have argued that in order to organise our enquiries into this broad subject area we need to develop conceptualisations of agency that locate agencies in the ‘complex dialectical interplay’ (de Bruijn et al 2007) with the structural contexts from which they arise and in relation to which operate. The range of areas of social action which the subject encompasses – from geopolitical manoeuvring to intra-regional negotiation to ‘ground-level’ actors – mean that accounts of agency may take rather different forms. and in a sense we should not be surprised by that – different analytical challenges will demand and produce different kinds of account. In this paper I have tried to outline some rather general pointers which are common to any account of agency and which necessitate us holding in motion a number of different but inter-related dimensions. These include an account of the different facets of agency – subjectivity, context and role – as well as its temporal aspects on the one hand; and the historical production of agency the wider conjuncture within which it operates on the other. Indeed, a rounded account of African agencies, in both conceptual and historical senses require holding in tension generalities and specificities within each: the former in terms of the relational understanding of agency and the structures which shape them and which in turn are made and remade by that agency; the latter in terms of the location of conjunctural analysis with the broader historical sweep of Africa’s development and insertion into the international system.

Notwithstanding the notable changes forged by African political actors in recent years, constraints on African agency in contemporary international politics remain formidable. Even if there is (temporarily?) some more room, the corners remain tight. However, developing analyses that recognise that such agency matters, that African actors are also makers and not just recipients of historical change made elsewhere, can open up a field of research which has the potential to reshape our understanding of Africa’s international relations.]
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Footnotes

1 Or alternatively, ‘The state cannot exercise power independent of those agents that act on its behalf. How far and in what way such powers are realised will depend on the action, reaction and interaction of specific social forces located within and beyond the complex ensemble [of the state]’ (2006: p.222).

2 And therefore is not, at core, about the state’s ability to control outcomes, as rather commonly claimed.

3 A point also noted by Chabal, Engel and de Haan (2007)

4 The policy of indirect rule being a good example where the defeat of more transformatory European aims, in Mamdani’s words, entailed a ‘moral and political surrender’ of the civilising mission to a law and order one (Cooper 1994: 1531; but see Mamdani 1996 in particular for this account).