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Eriksson Baaz, M. and Verweijen, J. orcid.org/0000-0002-4204-1172 (2018) Confronting the colonial: The (re)production of 'African' exceptionalism in critical security and military studies. *Security Dialogue*, 49 (1-2). pp. 57-69. ISSN 0967-0106

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617730975>

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Confronting the colonial: the (re)production of 'African' exceptionalism in critical security and military studies

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Published in *Security Dialogue*; Vol 49, Issue 1-2, 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617730975>

Abstract

Drawing on postcolonial theory, this article queries into the ways in which the concepts of militarism/militarization and securitization are applied to 'African' contexts. We highlight the selective nature of such application and probe into the potential reasons for and effects of this selectiveness, focusing on its signifying work. As we argue, the current selective uses of securitization and militarism/militarization in 'Africa' scholarship tend to recreate troublesome distinctions between 'developed' versus 'underdeveloped' spaces within theory and methodology. In particular, they contribute to the reproduction of familiar colonially scripted imagery of a passive and traditional 'Africa', ruled by crude force and somehow devoid of 'liberal' ideas and modes of governing. Yet we do not suggest simply discarding 'selectiveness' or believe that there are any other easy remedies to the tensions between universalism and particularism in theory application. Recognizing the ambivalent workings of colonial discourse, we rather contend that any attempts to trace the colonial into the present use of the concepts of securitization and militarism/militarization need to acknowledge the problematic nature of both discourses of 'African' Otherness and those of universalism and sameness.

Keywords: securitization; militarism; militarization; Africa; postcolonialism

Introduction

To say that theoretical frameworks and concepts need to be adjusted to the context of study is to state the obvious. The failure to do so, a repeated feature in the history of academic knowledge production, opens the door to ethnocentrism, particularly Euro/US-centrism. Yet, as a range of postcolonial scholarship warns, the selective application of theoretical notions and analytical concepts, including context-specific adaptations of their signification, has inherent dangers too. It may lead for instance to 'theoretical and methodological discrimination' (cf. Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen,

2016) whereby particular contexts are implicitly deemed 'too underdeveloped' for the application of (supposedly) theoretically 'sophisticated' concepts that are commonly used in relation to (purportedly) 'advanced (postindustrial) liberal democracies'. Such selective application of conceptual toolboxes inescapably mirrors our biases as scholars and our very partial constructions of the world. When addressing social phenomena in 'the South', but also, for 'Northern'-based scholars, 'at home' in 'the North', theoretical and conceptual choices are often shaped by colonial imageries and power relations (cf. Bhabha, 1994; Mudimbe, 1988; 1994; Spivak, 1993). The echoes of colonialism are particularly strong in scholarship on 'Africa', which in the colonial lexicon, was construed as located at the very end of the evolutionary ladder, hence constituting the least 'developed' Other (Childs and Williams, 1997; Mudimbe, 1988; 1994).

In this article, we examine the dangers and justifications of universal and selective theory application to 'Africa', focusing on the (non-) application of the concepts of militarism/militarization (notions that, according to different definitional traditions, have sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping meanings) and securitization (sometimes defined as partly overlapping with militarization, see the Introduction to this special issue). In what ways are these concepts used and what meanings are attached to them in relation to 'African' contexts? What may such choices reflect in terms of underlying assumptions? In particular, what (signifying) work do these concepts do? Probing into these questions is pertinent in the light of the strong Euro/US-centrism that continues to mark scholarly debates on securitization and militarism/militarization (cf. Barkawi, 2011; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Bilgin, 2011; Vuori, 2008; Wilkinson, 2007). Furthermore, it is warranted, as the theoretical and conceptual choices we make not only limit what we see and hear, but (through that) are in themselves constitutive – therefore opening up the risk of perpetuating and reproducing the problematic and ultimately colonially scripted imageries that continue to inform much scholarly work.

As we demonstrate, the ways in which militarism/militarization and securitization have up to now been applied to 'African' contexts risk reproducing familiar and troublesome imageries of 'African' passivity and backwardness. Yet this finding does not allow for a clear answer to the question whether theoretical and methodological discrimination is indeed at work and whether such discrimination is warranted. Taking a definite position on these issues, we contend, is dangerous given the contradictory workings of the colonial. The colonial project was intrinsically characterized by the politics of both universalism and thereby Euro-centrism (promoting and legitimizing colonization through the idea of Europe as the universal norm) and particularism, racism and Otherness (promoting and legitimizing colonialism through the imagery of the inferior Other) (cf. Bhabha, 1994; Mudimbe,

1988; Spivak, 1993). As argued by Bhabha, colonial discourse was marked by ambivalence, in that colonizers desired a reformed, recognizable Other who was 'almost the same, but not quite' (1994: 86). Therefore, any attempt to trace the colonial into the present use of the concepts of securitization and militarism/militarization in relation to 'Africa' needs to acknowledge that both discourses of 'African' Otherness (uncritically refuting the applicability of certain concepts to 'Africa') and discourses of sameness (uncritically arguing that concepts and approaches originating in 'the North' are applicable everywhere) are inherently problematic.

Why, then, do we focus on 'Africa', (and even on the problematic notion of 'sub-Saharan Africa')? By treating 'Africa' as a supposedly monolithic whole, do we not 'normalize' the 'Africa-as-a-country' discourses that much scholarship highlighting its diversity tries to deconstruct? And does a singular focus on 'Africa' not risk reproducing the very representations of 'African' Otherness and the 'African' exceptionalism that we seek to problematize? The answer to the latter question is an unambiguous yes: such a risk certainly exists. We believe, however, that this risk is less acute given that the focus here is on querying into (common academic renderings of) the *idea* of 'Africa' (Appiah, 1993; Mudimbe, 1988) rather than 'Africa itself'. Our choice is also partly grounded in postcolonial scholarship that demonstrates that while there were curious similarities in the representations of all colonized Others (Loomba, 1998), these representations were also marked by difference –with 'Africa' often represented as being at the highest stage of 'primitivism'. These differences have continued to work in the postcolonial, as also reflected in much 'Africa' scholarship (Abrahamsen, 2003; Childs and Williams, 1997; Dunn, 2001; Mudimbe, 1988).

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The first part reviews (in brush strokes, given the limited space, and therefore at risk of overgeneralization) how the concepts of militarism/militarization and securitization have been applied to 'African' contexts in the scholarly literature. We then explore how to make sense of the selective application and diverging connotations of these two concepts, and venture into a discussion of the signifying effects of that selectiveness. We end by reflecting on the implications of our analysis for academic praxis.

Securitization and militarism/militarization applied to 'African' contexts

The notions of both militarization/militarism and securitization, which have a distinct genesis and evolution, have been applied in various – and shifting– ways to 'African'

contexts. In the following, we consider for each term first its general signification, and then its specific application to 'Africa'.

Militarization/militarism and 'Africa'

The term militarism has been defined and conceptualized in various ways (Berghahn, 1981; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012). Among other conceptualizations, it has been regarded as a particular ideology (glorifying war, force and violence), a feature of regimes relating to military buildups (e.g. increasing spending on the military) or a specific kind of civil-military relations (Berghahn, 1981; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012; see also Eastwood in this issue). Additionally, militarism has been approached as a set of discourses driving and resulting from 'militarization', interpreted as a process (Luckham, 1994). Central to most definitions of militarism/militarization is the idea of 'the military' (either as an institution or a notion) 'extending into' supposedly 'civilian' spheres and subjectivities (cf. Thee, 1977). Other scholars have alternatively conceptualized militarism/militarization as 'the blurring or erasure of distinctions between ... military and civilian' (Sjoberg and Via, 2010: 7). Whether regarded as extending into or merging with 'the civilian', in both cases, 'the military' is attributed essential characteristics that separate it from 'the civilian'. As we will outline below, it is in part the attribution of (seemingly) universal significations to either 'the military' or 'the civilian' that renders applications of militarism/militarization across contexts problematic.

Analysing studies on the military and militarism in 'developing countries' in the 1960s and 1970s, Luckham observes their grounding in time-bound theories of modernization and political development. Focusing on democratization and civilian control, the Euro/US-centrism of these accounts was obvious (Luckham, 1994: 4), in particular in relation to conceptualizations of 'military professionalism' and 'civil-military relations' along Huntingtonian (1957) lines. After a brief trend whereby 'African' armies were considered agents of 'modernization' (Pye, 1962), 'African' militarism/militarization was construed as a (deviant) opposite to (idealized) notions of 'modern' (read: 'western') armies and political orders. One domain in which this supposed deviance came to the fore was the pronounced political role of many 'African' military establishments, especially their 'praetorianism' or penchant for coup d'états (Welch, 1970).

Some scholars located these 'abnormalities' in the very nature of 'African' armies and political orders. As Decalo writes (1990[1976]: 6), 'Many African armies bear little resemblance to the Western organizational prototype and are instead a coterie of distinct armed camps owing primary clientelist allegiances to a handful of mutually competitive officers of different ranks.' Others, by contrast, read 'African'

militarism in relation to universalist Marxist-inspired approaches. For instance, Murray (1966) held that militarism in 'Africa' resulted from an imperialist conspiracy to prevent newly independent former colonies from gaining economic independence. In this view, predominant agency was located in 'western hegemonic forces' while 'Africa' served mostly as the theater where they enacted their (imperialist) plays, thus being cast in the role of (passive) 'victim'. Similar representations were visible in the 1970s and 1980s literature on militarism/militarization in 'the Third World', which emphasized 'western' arms exports and military assistance as key drivers of these phenomena (Thee, 1977), although 'internal factors' were generally also acknowledged to play a role (Klare, 1978).

In the post-Cold War literature on 'African' military and political institutions, the terminology of militarism/militarization figures less prominently, to the advantage of the lexicons of 'violent conflict' and '(in)security'. This development, mirrored in the increasing concern of 'mainstream' International Relations (IR) with security and securitization (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012; see also the Introduction to this issue), was propelled by the rise of discourses on 'new wars', 'human security' and the 'security-development nexus' (Duffield, 2001; Stern and Öjendal, 2010; see also Abrahamsen in this issue). As concluded by Stavrianakis and Selby (2012:7–8), 'traditional' IR's focus on military power and violence was largely 'superseded by the problem of internal lawlessness and anarchy – with the corollary ... that the study of militarism [here mostly seen in relation to the international system and states] is also somewhat outdated'. A privileged outlet for security-centered discourses on 'Africa' was the emerging policy-prescriptive genre of security sector reform – a set of policy interventions that critical scholars associate with the 'liberal peace' project (Andersen, 2011). This genre recycled many of the earlier notions of 'African military unprofessionalism' (Howe, 2001: 27) that were anchored in 'western'-centric, Weberian conceptualizations of the nation-state and the associated role and shape of the armed forces (Egnell and Haldén, 2009).

Reflecting the fragmentation of present-day academia, new theoretical developments that emerged in relation to militarism/militarization in the 1990s and 2000s, now at the core of the field of critical military studies (Basham, Belkin and Griffins, 2015; see also Basham in this issue), have influenced 'Africa' scholarship only gradually. With notable exceptions (e.g. Cock, 1989; Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen, 2016; Frowd and Sandor, in this issue; Mama, 1998), this scholarship has generally paid limited attention to 'the everyday' and the (civilian) micro-practices that (re)produce militarism/militarization, a staple of 'western' debates since Enloe's (2000) famous 'can of soup'. Even when (civilian) micro-level dynamics are being discussed, these are often portrayed as predominantly shaped by a militarism

ultimately stemming from the (neocolonial) patriarchal and predatory state (Daley, 2008; McFadden, 2008). Thus the bias towards the macro level and national politics displayed in the Cold War-era literature (Luckham, 1994) remains largely uncorrected. Another trend that is only weakly visible in 'Africa' scholarship is the increasing criticism (evident particularly within geography and gender studies) on efforts to articulate 'universally valid' specifications of the contents and forms of militarism/militarization (e.g. Bernazolli and Flint, 2009). Enloe (2004: 219), for instance, argued that inherent to militarism are ideas that 'having enemies is a natural condition' and 'that hierarchical relations produce effective action'. While rare scholarship (e.g. Luckham, 1994; Verweijen, 2013) has uncovered that in particular 'African' contexts the military has different connotations than the hierarchically organized fighting of enemies, these findings have not contributed to the development of alternative paths towards the study of militarism/militarization in 'Africa'. A similar pattern is evident with regard to recently intensifying criticism on universalist articulations of militarism in relation to gender, which argues that such articulations obscure the plurality of militarized masculinities and the manifold and shifting relations between masculinities, femininities and violence (Higate, 2003; Henry and Natanel, 2016; Kirby and Henry, 2012; Ortega, 2012). This emphasis on the diverse understandings and effects of gendered notions has made limited inroads into 'Africa' scholarship (Eriksson Baaz, 2017).

In sum, scholarship on militarism/militarization in relation to 'Africa' is marked by an ambivalence between universalism and particularism – on the one hand presupposing that the meanings of these notions are the same as elsewhere and 'measuring' 'African' armies and political orders against 'supposedly universal' (but often deeply 'western') standards, and on the other hand, foregrounding 'African' particularism by demonstrating its deviance and primitivism. As we will now show, applications of the concept of securitization, by contrast, are marked mainly by particularism in the sense that the concept is applied to 'Africa' in a very specific way.

Securitization and 'Africa'

Securitization theory, which considers the ways in which phenomena are construed as 'security issues', was developed through the work of the Copenhagen School in the 1990s as part of critical security studies. The latter emerged in response to mainstream views of security held in IR in the Cold-War era, which were primarily oriented towards state security (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998), as also reflected in its focus on and understandings of militarism. Developed to make sense of new conceptualizations of 'security', as well as new applications of the term in (policy) discourses in 'western democracies', securitization theory has been primarily

employed in relation to 'Northern' contexts (Barkawi, 2011; 2012). Nevertheless, in recent years, its application to non-'western' settings has been on the rise (Bilgin, 2011), although the theory continues to rarely figure in scholarship on (sub-Saharan) 'Africa'. Moreover, its application to 'African' settings has mostly been selective, focusing primarily on the securitization of 'western' policy interventions, such as development aid and military assistance.

The often critical scholarship on the securitization of 'western' actors' 'Africa' policy has exposed the growing emphasis on notions of risk and threat in discourses on and interactions with 'Africa' from the 1990s onwards, as reflected in its supposed 'dysfunctionalities' (often framed in the terminology of 'fragile', 'failed' or 'collapsed' states) being increasingly portrayed as a source of threats to 'western' (often framed as 'global') security (cf. Carmody, 2005; Duffield, 2001; 2007; Gibert, 2009). These discursive and policy shifts occurred first under the influence of the rise of the 'New Wars' and security-development nexus paradigms (Duffield, 2001), and were then accelerated by the so-called 'War on Terror' (Abrahamsen, 2005; 2017). A range of studies has demonstrated how these developments have contributed to the securitization of, inter alia, US 'Africa' policy, as reflected in the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) (e.g. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ojakorotu, 2010); policies to promote 'good governance,' including via security sector reform (e.g. Bachmann and Hönke, 2009; Kohl, 2015); and 'western' migration policy, framing 'African' migration as a source of transnational threats to 'the Global North' (Dover, 2008; Obi, 2010).

As emerges from this cursory literature overview, securitization primarily appears as something that characterizes social and discursive practices enacted 'upon' 'Africa' by actors from 'the West'/'Global North' (although drawing such distinctions between the 'inside' and 'outside' of 'Africa' are both impossible and dangerous, cf. Abrahamsen, 2017). Hence, little attention is paid to the various 'African' actors who are (partly) governed by these 'western' interventions, and the ways in which they attach meanings to and co-produce such efforts (Hönke and Müller, 2012). For instance, in literature on security sector reform, the voices of the primary 'objects of reform' –'African' military and police personnel– are particularly absent (cf. Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2017). When discussing 'African' actors at all, this literature rather focuses on civil society organizations (e.g. Bachmann, 2012); national government policies and practices (e.g. Krogstad, 2014), or regional institutions such as the African Union (e.g. Haacke and Williams, 2008). There are a few exceptions to this general pattern, which study securitization as a process primarily driven by 'African' actors through everyday practices at the micro level (e.g. Buur, Jensen and Stepputat, 2007; Schomerus and de Vries, 2014). Accordingly, the scarce literature on securitization in relation to 'Africa' displays a bias towards macro-level processes

and formal institutions similar to that of works on militarism/militarization, to the detriment of the study of 'the everyday'.

Making sense of selective theory application

The above discussion of the literature shows that analytical toolboxes that are common in both critical security studies and critical military studies are rarely used in relation to '*African*' actors in '*African*' contexts, and if they are employed, such usage follows distinct patterns. Hence, '*African*' actors are rarely conceptualized *as the subjects of security*; instead they tend to emerge as props on a stage where the security politics affecting other subjects (e.g. 'Europe') play out. This selective application fits into a wider scholarly trend of '*African*' exceptionalism, whereby certain theoretical traditions, including those broadly (but contentiously, see Angermuller, 2015) labeled 'post-structuralist' have generally been less applied in scholarship addressing '*African*' actors in '*Africa*', although there are certainly numerous exceptions (e.g. Hoffmann, 2014; Mbembe, 2001; Roitman, 2004) and this observation does not apply to work on South Africa (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2008; Death, 2014).

How, then, might we make sense of this apparently selective application of theoretical toolboxes? Of course, much has to do with the sociology of academic knowledge production, in particular the ways in which academia and academic disciplines have institutionalized thematically, theoretically and geographically. Since security studies emerged in the context of IR, critical security studies so far continues to have IR – a discipline where '*Africa*' has traditionally been marginalized (Dunn and Shaw, 2001) – implicitly or explicitly as a frame of reference (Abrahamsen, 2017). Moreover, as argued above, securitization theory was clearly conceived and developed in relation to western Europe (Barkawi, 2011, 2012; Bilgin, 2011). At the same time, '*Africa*' continues to draw an overwhelming interest within the field of anthropology, where securitization theory has up to now made relatively limited inroads (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2012). The same applies to '*Africa studies*' in general, a field that is heavily oriented towards the empirical rather than (in particular post-structural and postcolonial) theorizing (Abrahamsen, 2003; 2017; Gabay and Death, 2012). Similarly, critical military studies, which emerged in part to correct some of the biases of more 'traditional' military studies, has overwhelmingly focused on 'western' armed forces, fostering an orientation towards the 'global North' (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen, 2016).

An additional factor is that '*Africa*'-based '*Africa*' scholars, an audience likely to write about security issues in '*Africa*', tend not to work in the theoretical traditions of critical military and security studies, not least since they face the problem of limited

access to the journals in which debates in these fields are held (including *Security Dialogue*). Indeed, to paraphrase Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2010) there are important financial and institutional reasons why a 'Kinshasa School' of critical security studies (similar to those of Aberystwyth or Copenhagen) has not (yet) emerged. Furthermore, scholars in these countries are confronted with personal security considerations when writing about security governance in a critical manner. Aside from institutional and political inequalities between 'Africa'- and 'Northern'-based scholars, the selective application of securitization and militarism/militarization also reflects certain methodological challenges. For instance, the language skills required for studying security discourses or the militarization of the everyday create barriers, which in turn shape case selection (Lupovici, 2014).

Apart from these institutionalized inequalities, a crucial (from the point of departure of this article) reason for the selective application of militarism/militarization and securitization is located in the idea that these concepts, and particularly securitization, are inadequate for application outside of 'western' contexts. For instance, Wilkinson (2007) argues that despite its avowed anti-Eurocentrism, securitization theory continues to be hamstrung by a 'Westphalian straightjacket' (after Buzan and Little, 2001: 25) as it is based on western conceptions of state and society. Others have highlighted the theory's (increasingly criticized) emphasis on the 'speech act' to the exclusion of other securitizing mechanisms, including 'security as silence' (Hansen, 2000: 287) and how this leads to 'western'-biased analyses. Vuori (2008), in turn, detects problems in the application of securitization theory to non-democratic states, due to the emphasis on both 'speech' and 'special politics', which bears implicit assumptions about 'normal politics'. He highlights, however, that securitization is based on an 'illocutionary speech act' relating to the universal capacity for language, concluding that a more careful elaboration of securitization theory allows it to 'travel' to non-democratic contexts, without losing its explanatory value (Vuori, 2008).

While expressing valid concerns, some of these criticisms ascribe a problematic essentializing homogeneity both to 'the West' and the 'non-West'. For instance, for Wilkinson (2007: 10), Waever et al's (1993: 21) assertion that societies have a certain institutional durability 'assumes a degree of continuity, stability and cohesion that is not present in many "Second" and "Third World" countries, if indeed it is present in all Western countries'. Focusing on the positionality of the researcher, Bilgin (2011), similarly observes the (sometimes implicit) assumption that securitization theory's primary field of application is 'advanced societies'. Consequently, as she argues, scholars outside western Europe (in this case from

Turkey) may apply the theory to demonstrate how ‘advanced’ (as in approximating ‘liberal democracies’) their societies are. As a corollary, not applying securitization theory, as is the case in relation to ‘African’ actors in ‘Africa’, may feed into assumptions that ‘African’ societies are ‘not advanced enough’ – as we will further discuss below.

The signifying effects of selectiveness

What, then, are the (potential) discursive effects of the current selective application of militarism/militarization and securitization and the ways in which they are at work in relation to the signifier ‘Africa’? As highlighted at the outset, we embarked on this enquiry from the perspective that the ways in which these concepts are ‘put at work, or not put to work’ form part of the ongoing construction of our ‘idea of Africa’. Based on our analysis, we suggest that despite the fact that much of the scholarship cited above undoubtedly is well intentioned, critical and much needed, the manner in which the tensions between universalism and particularism play out in its uses of the concepts militarism/militarization and securitization contributes to the recycling of some problematic (colonially scripted) imageries.

First, whether or not one subscribes to the idea that ‘securitization’ is something that ‘African’ actors engage in themselves (and hence does not pertain only to external interventions), the limited attention to how securitization processes are co-produced by ‘African’ actors somehow imputes to them the classic imagery of ‘African’ passivity (e.g. Mudimbe, 1988; Pieterse, 1995). As a corollary, it risks inflating the power and influence of external actors, whose governing technologies are portrayed as inherently pervasive, powerful and effective. Accordingly, it might contribute to reproducing the colonial idea of an ‘Africa’ that only exists in relation to ‘the West’, an ‘Africa’ without history and indeed agency – not only overstating the power of Europe/‘the West’ as the origin of history and as the all pervasive force shaping social and political developments in ‘Africa’ (Appiah, 1993), but also (implicitly) denying an inherent interest or relevance to studying ‘African’ actors in ‘African’ contexts.

That problematic portrayals of agency/passivity also emerge in critical studies engaged in exposing and resisting neocolonial relations is clearly reflected in the earlier debates within postcolonial studies. For instance, McClintock (1995: 11) warned that the field risks reproducing Eurocentrism by marking ‘the world’s multitudinous cultures, not positively by what distinguishes them but by a subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time’. Similarly, despite the crucial importance of calls to adopt, within studies of the securitization of ‘western’ policy towards ‘Africa’, a ‘stronger analytical focus on how rationales and policy tools

are challenged, reinforced and transformed in situ' (Bachmann, 2012: 42), by taking 'western' policy as their point of departure these studies remain ultimately 'western'-centric.

Second, the arguments against the applicability of securitization theory to 'Africa' appear to carry familiar colonially scripted notions of 'developed' vs. 'underdeveloped' spaces. These notions are echoed in debates on the (im)possibilities of using Foucauldian perspectives in scholarship on (security) government in 'Africa' more generally. For Death (2011:1), who advocates such application, 'Africa' has frequently been

invoked as one of the limits of Foucauldian thought; a realm of politics so far removed from the advanced liberal European societies which Foucault's own work addressed that it marks a point at which theorists should reject their Foucauldian theoretical frameworks and turn to other approaches.

Death's quote indicates that arguments against employing Foucauldian approaches in 'Africa' scholarship often emphasize, in the words of Joseph (2010: 223), how 'governmentality can only usefully be applied to those areas that might be characterized as having an advanced form of liberalism', while in 'other parts of the world the management of populations may have to rely on cruder disciplinary practices'.

As reflected in this citation, reasoning against the adequacy of employing Foucauldian approaches in the study of 'Africa' tends to invoke notions of a traditional/non-advanced 'Africa' somehow devoid of 'liberal' ideas and modes of governing. Echoing sedimented and stereotypical imageries inscribed in the colonial library, 'Africa' appears here as marked by authoritarianism and tyranny – a place where brute force reigns. The same assumptions can implicitly or explicitly be found in much of the literature on militarism/militarization in 'Africa', which partly explains its focus on 'deviant' regime and state characteristics (originating) at the macro level. Arguably, similar presuppositions inform the idea that securitization theory is not applicable to 'Africa' owing to its emphasis on 'speech acts', suggesting the absence of 'sophisticated political debates' stemming from the primary reliance on 'crude' forms of political and bodily action. Such implicit assumptions about primitivism are further reinforced by the limited attention paid to subjectivities in research on both militarism/militarization and securitization, as if 'technologies of the self' do not matter in the face of what are presented as more rudimentary tools of government.

Through the judgment of particular theoretical tools as 'inappropriate' for certain contexts, supposedly modern, liberal (and universal) values such as freedom, human

rights and democracy are portrayed as exclusive property of ‘the West’– as is more explicitly the case with approaches to militarism/militarization in ‘Africa’ that take ‘western’ militaries and political orders as their yardstick. These portrayals were crucial in legitimizing the colonial project as a civilizing project, and continue to be mirrored in justifications for numerous postcolonial interventions, such as security sector reform (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2017). Critically reviewing such claims of proprietorship, as well as the very selective application of the claimed values in the manner in which ‘the West’ engages with ‘Africa’ (similar to other postcolonial sites), is paramount to postcolonial scholarship. As Spivak (1993: 284) frames it, rather than rejecting the values that are claimed, the task is to ‘engage in a persistent critique of what one cannot not want’. By upholding *a priori* ideas that some theories and concepts are adjusted only to a supposedly ‘advanced liberal West/North’ we risk dangerously masking, rather than acknowledging, the ways in which different forms of power and governing are present and traceable across ‘the Global North’ and ‘South’, including ‘Africa’ (e.g. Buur, Jensen and Stepputat, 2007; Dunn, 2001; 2010). As concluded by Barkawi (2011: 716), ‘it is all too easy to forget amid the everyday world of Western societies that our states too, and the orders they provide, rely on coercive power, on an iron foundation deployed at home and abroad’. Barkawi highlights here the problematic tendency of securitization theory to uncritically reflect and reproduce the security politics of so-called advanced liberal democracies (see also Bigo, 2002), thus participating in the ‘defensive liberal politics of war by obfuscating the possibility of *aggression*’ (Barkawi, 2011: 715). Similarly, in obscuring how securitization and militarism/militarization in ‘Africa’ are (re)produced through fine-grained mechanisms of everyday discursive and social practices, including by shaping subjectification among (civilian) non-elites, there is a risk of misdiagnosing the drivers and depth of these processes, and therefore of potentially hampering ways of addressing them.

Concluding reflections

Drawing upon postcolonial theory, this article has analysed how the concepts of militarism/militarization and securitization have been applied (and not applied) to ‘African’ contexts, querying into the underlying assumptions about universalism and particularism and probing into the representational work that such applications do. Attending to these questions is crucial since the theoretical and conceptual choices we make not only limit what we see and hear but are constitutive of our *ideas* of ‘Africa’ – thereby opening up the risk of reproducing familiar and problematic images inscribed in the colonial library. Indeed, as we suggest here, the current selective application of militarism/militarization and securitization tends to reproduce troublesome colonially scripted tropes of ‘African’ passivity, ‘African’ deviance and ‘African’ primitivism.

Yet, owing to the contradictory workings of colonial discourses as described at the start of this article, we resist the (impossible) task of arguing in favour or against the application of securitization and militarism/militarization in research on 'Africa'. Similar to what Abrahamsen (2017: 126-127) observes in relation to the position of 'Africa' in IR, 'it is not sufficient simply to "bring Africa in"' (reflecting the universalist argument) or 'to demonstrate the inadequacy or failure of IR theory to capture African realities' (reflecting the particularist argument). At the same time, we do not call for the development of 'Africa-specific' or 'African derived' concepts of militarism/militarization or securitization either. Clearly, such a route would – through the overdetermined signifier 'Africa' itself (Abrahamsen, 2017) – repeat the problematic idea that there are some central bodies of thought and experience that are shared by 'Africans' more generally. As argued by Appiah (1993: 32) (as well as by many other postcolonial thinkers) this idea must be seen as 'an outgrowth of European racialism' – reflecting a politics which simply 'make[s] real the imaginary identities to which Europe has subjected us' – thus merely reproducing colonial ideas of 'African' homogeneity and Otherness.

Rather than suggesting easy answers and remedies to the tensions between universalism and particularism in theory application, what we call for here is that we (as scholars researching militarism/militarization and securitization in and outside 'Africa') intensify our efforts to be 'unscrupulously vigilant (i.e. hyper-reflexive) about our complicity' (Kapoor, 2004: 641). Accordingly, we need to acknowledge and interrogate how our desires, conceptions of the world and interests are unavoidably written into the theoretical and conceptual choices we make –and, crucially, to recognize that these choices are constitutive. Hence, there is a need to further engage in efforts to 'think otherwise' (Spivak, 1993), recognizing that the concepts of militarism/militarization and securitization are deeply political conceptual tools, and (like most theory) are shaped by a long history of colonialism and racism. Yet these efforts should clearly not end with mere contemplative interrogation; they must also encompass a commitment to address the deeply entangled 'other' structural and institutional circumstances that contribute to the selective application of concepts highlighted in this article – such as the sociology of academic knowledge production and inequalities between 'Africa'- and 'Northern'-based scholars – acknowledging that transforming these forms part of the same postcolonial challenge and struggle.

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