



SPOTLIGHT
ON
AFRICA

From Africa research to Africa-related research

A change in perspective can be observed in all disciplines.

By Kokou Azamede and Hans Peter Hahn

Over the past 20 years, the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt has systematically developed new perspectives in Africa-related research, among others, for example through interdisciplinary and transcontinental concepts. Even today, however, inequalities that have grown throughout history make it difficult to understand the continent properly, which has been and is still too often regarded as a research object.

The Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies was established at Goethe University Frankfurt in 2003 as the result of an extraordinarily successful Collaborative Research Centre with a regional focus on West Africa. Since then, the centre has bundled a broad spectrum of research activities related to Africa in the humanities and natural sciences. It initiates interdisciplinary research projects, promotes cooperation with African partners, supports young interdisciplinary researchers with a focus on Africa-related topics and engages in public relations to show a nuanced picture of Africa. In comparison with other important centres of Africa-related research in Germany (Bayreuth, Cologne, Hamburg, Leipzig, Berlin), the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies is distinguished by its wide variety of subjects and participating disciplines. More so than the researchers in the other places, those in Frankfurt have very different disciplinary backgrounds that are each connected to thematic areas related to Africa and beyond.

Interdisciplinarity was already an important feature of Collaborative Research Centre 268

that preceded the centre and was funded by the German Research Foundation from 1988 to 2003. Researchers in CRC 268 worked together on clearly defined regional case studies with colleagues from archaeology, anthropology, geography and linguistics to learn more about the natural conditions and cultural history of West Africa. The research programme “Africa’s Asian Options” (AFRASO; see article on page 46), implemented from 2013 to 2019 and funded by Germany’s Federal Ministry of Education and Research, marked a further development in the centre’s activities, as the focus here was no longer on Africa as a continent, but on the transcontinental interdependencies between Africa and Asia.

Interdisciplinarity beyond the boundaries of classical “Africa research” was therefore the centre’s founding principle, and AFRASO expanded this perspective in its later work. Research in the AFRASO programme made the importance of looking at Africa as a globally connected continent even clearer. AFRASO’s research findings show that it would be shortsighted to limit research to the continent as a

Graffiti art in Soweto near Johannesburg, South Africa.



The “Pilot African Postgraduate Academy (PAPA)”, which was developed by Goethe University Frankfurt, the University of Basel and the Point Sud Research Centre in Bamako, began work in 2020. The photograph shows the first fellows and mentors.

geographical entity. To produce a balanced picture of Africa, it is necessary to examine trans-continental contexts.

Innovative research concepts and findings can thus change the image of Africa as a whole. Numerous other projects initiated and implemented by the centre’s members over the past 20 years share this insight: dealing with Africa always opens up new perspectives. Africa is not something that can be separated from Europe. Recent research has instead repeatedly asked the following question: How can Africa-related research bring us closer to an adequate understanding of the continent?

The centre’s members address this key issue by critically questioning their research as well as constantly seeking new approaches and examining their added value. Increased sensitivity to colonial interdependencies in public debate is currently of particular importance. In the context of colonial history, it is becoming increasingly clear how close the historical ties between Europe and Africa were and are. To date, research has ignored power asymmetries far too often. Europe’s implication in Africa’s fate was wrongly considered to be a phenomenon of the past. Uncovering such inequalities in the past as well as in the present is one of the new priorities that the centre intends to address by questioning its self-image and realigning its direction.

On the one hand, this concerns research topics and methods. It is not only a question for the humanities or historical sciences of how power asymmetries could be described and overcome but also a challenge for the scientific disciplines engaged in Africa-related research. Today, the persistence of this imbalance calls into question the overall cogency of research on Africa, as research conducted from Europe has been shown to produce biased results.

Shortcomings in this research include the neglect of certain fields, such as local politics in colonial contexts or the use of databases in Africa. Some of the approaches that the centre will in future adopt in order to overcome this imbalance are:

1. Research into colonial heritage in all areas (culture, politics, economy, health/medicine, science and religion)
2. Studying different cultural/geographical and social interactions; understanding colonial involvement as a transcultural field of experimentation
3. Developing methods of analysing and overcoming inequality in all areas: research infrastructure, access to knowledge resources, obtaining academic degrees, etc.

On the other hand, it is also about questioning forms of research. While collaborative research has become a widely accepted standard in recent years and there are currently hardly any projects without the participation of scientists from both continents, much remains to be done with regard to a common, European-African definition of research questions on an equal footing, which is fundamental for promoting “true” collaboration. Only such collaboration produces sustainable results, which need to be verified by experts from different cultural backgrounds.

At present, the possibilities for joint project development are still far too limited. Support for collaboratively developed projects is only available in a few cases. The guidelines laid down by funding organisations do not allow projects to be managed independently by the partners in the African countries.

In particular, the funding of young researchers from these countries is proving very difficult –



The board of directors of the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies:

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despite some lighthouse projects at the centre such as the Point Sud programme funded by the German Research Foundation, the Volkswagen Foundation's fellowship programme "Knowledge for Tomorrow" or the "Pilot African Postgraduate Academy (PAPA)" led by Professor Mamadou Diawara of the Gerda Henkel Foundation. Overall, there is neither a sufficient number of scholarships for doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers in Germany nor are there any suitable exchange programmes or international study programmes in which universities in African countries are involved. Much remains to be done in this regard. One of the major challenges for future Africa-related research lies in improving collaborative structures, which would make exchange on an equal footing possible in the first place. ●

The authors



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