

## Africa has no special smell: Towards academic equality in African studies

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In my work in Brazil, together with a group of colleagues, I have tried to incorporate African studies – with a special attention for those carried out from within the African continent – in the mainstream of the social studies. This is part of a larger effort to decolonize our production of knowledge by developing new South-South links and promoting what I call a new horizontal curiosity – as a way to counter our historical vertical obsession with the Global North. To be frank I have much more experience as facilitator of African studies in Brazil, maybe even as passeur of African studies, than any actual specialization in African studies proper.

The improvement of the conditions for knowledge production in Africa itself and for scholars based in Africa more generally are at stake in this paper <sup>1</sup>. This is, of course, a concern shared by most and a topic that has ravished the mind of many African intellectuals, whether based in Africa such as Mafeje and Houtondji or partly abroad such as Mamdani, Macamo and Mkandawire, as well as their main organization since its inception, CODESRIA. I owe a great deal to these colleagues and their radicalism with their denunciation of intellectual dependence and (self) imposed theoretical introversion if not invisibility as opposed to universal ambitions as regards social theory, to which I associate my own Latin American radical touch. It is

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the same radicalism that in Brazil produced the Factory of Ideas twenty years ago: an international advanced course in ethnic and African studies that operates largely though not exclusively along the South-South nexus and that posits that intellectual excellence and social inclusion can go hand in glove. The Fábrica de Ideas, as we call it, is also the first think tank on these questions based in cities and towns of the Global South, often in their historical centres, as opposed to most other think tanks that are based in places such as Stanford and Bellagio, locations that are in many ways in the middle of nowhere – agora without polis. In fact, I believe that anti-Africanism and anti-Latin Americanism, and the seminal though sometimes acrimonious debates they have generated on issues such as endogeneity and cosmopolitanism, should look much more to one another for inspiration. CODESRIA and CLACSO (Latin America Social Sciences Research Council) should cooperate much more on this. Henceforth here in this paper, which is very much fresh from the oven, I do not plan to say anything particularly new nor that encompassing.

In my opinion such improvement of the intellectual climate requires and is related to, among other things, the development of African studies from a broader variety of regions and viewpoints, associated to a critical reassessment of traditional African studies, area studies and development studies usually originated in the Global North. Here I ought to add that of these three terms area and development studies have received over time much more criticism than African studies after all. Area studies have been associated with the term plot or coup d'état, whereas development with the notion of myth. A frequent criticism of African studies is milder: it is an end in itself. Here, of course, we need to historicize because we all know that there have been several generations of African studies and Africanism, from the first colonial generation to successive generation that engaged more critically with colonialism and its aftermath even though a truly decolonial multi-centred Africanism is still to be or, if we want to be optimistic, is still in the making.

My simple contention is that this improvement also requires an effort to make the South-South connection and perspective sustainable in this troubled world where soft and hard power and cultural cold wars are more diffused and entangled than ever. In Brazil we are experiencing an ironical situation: we are too great to receive US and, to some

extent, European money, but the mastering of our national money is rather whimsical. Nowadays the Brics, which seemed to have been the engine of the South South, are much less in evidence in terms of leadership – South Africa, Brazil and India have become much more inward looking, conservative and isolationist. Generally speaking, it has been progressive governments that have been more prone to invest in the South-South. So was the case in Brazil in the periods between 1959-1964 and 2002-2016. The present Temer government, result of a silent coup, has primed in cutting most exchanges and South-South projects as part of an effort to dismount the Lula foreign policy. Our promethean effort to turn Brazil from a country where to come and do “tropical research”, as well as experience first-hand tropical life and atmosphere, to a tropical research country is alas faltering. Bear in mind that Brazil has historically been a major destination for academic tourism, so such renewed magic, political and emotional “turn towards the North” is especially painful to most of us. The real question is how to conceive of the South-South exchange so as to make it sustainable. Such exchange needs also to be based on our own resources (perhaps also crowd sourcing plus the support of selected private companies) as well as the support of key centers in the North, such as Michigan State University or University of Indiana at Bloomington in the United States or in Europe the University of Bayreuth – in a country such as Germany that is experimenting with new forms of soft power, also through institutions such as the Goethe Institut (see the very interesting Vila Sul Project in Brazil which brings every year for three months to Bahia a number of scholars and artists also from the

Global South). Ours ought to be an exchange based on the win-win principle, where both sides benefit somewhat equally. For this reason, the agenda of each partner should be stated in good detail.

The South-South need not repeat the same errors of the North-South. We can learn a great deal from a critical reappraisal of its history as much as of the history of the South-South since 1945. This raises a number of methodological, ethical and political questions. Let me add that even though I work in an interdisciplinary graduate program, and African studies tends to be interdisciplinary, I do consider the question especially from the point of view of anthropology. Because I am an anthropologist and because anthropology has been the most criticized of the social sciences in such critical scrutiny, to the point of becoming sometime a useful scapegoat.

First, we have a question of scale, which is very dear to us anthropologists – truly small-scale fans. The advancement in critical theory has questioned the very scale of most African studies (and, I dare say, of anthropology more generally, because it is the branch of the social sciences traditionally leading with less segmented and less complex societies or, more recently, with small samples of complex wholes). There has been a move from an emphasis on community to a focus on networks, flows and social, cultural and economic landscapes; as well as a move from area to global studies – which emphasize the porosity and interconnectivity of different cultural areas and regional markets. In this move away from the closeness and even coziness of the small scale to the often less tangible and certainly less easy to explore ethnographically big world of flows, landscapes and network,

we ought to scrutinize what we lose and what we gain. Beware of throwing away the baby out with the bathwater. A focus on community need not mean isolationism and it can have the advantage of eliciting subjectivities and actors that are often almost invisible if not silenced from a distance.

Second, we have the question of complexity. It goes without saying that Africa is as contradictory as a continent can be: Afropolitanism and neo-nativism can share the same space and time, the same city and the same market place (the market of Medina in Dakar or of Bandim in Bissau for example), or the same national election campaign for that matter! Complexity as much as ambiguity have always been there, even though some poststructuralists and, more recently, “decolonialists” seem to suggest that ambiguity is the essence if not even the exclusivity of late-modernity. As a matter of fact, the question is that nowadays we are more inclined to perceive it and highlight it. The local has never been exactly as local as we described it or perceived it or as it was narrated or recalled in the process of generating or reinventing traditions over and again. We should learn to accept complexity, relativity and contradiction as the normal state of African societies and cultures, rather than the exception – and, why not, of most if not each and every society.

In the third place we have the issue of experience. Africa, even more so that the rest of the Global South, has been idealized as trope that once could best define as a “first hand continent”. In other words, in the geopolitics of knowledge Africa is the “place” where to carry out field work, where to delve in messy and often deteriorating, but rich and colourful archives, where to experience things first hand

– without the intermediation of institutions, colleagues or, even less so, “local” intellectual traditions – where local perspectives can be and must be felt, seen, smelled, tasted and understood personally, first hand. It is the place of raw data, not the locality where data can and should be processed and stored, possibly in close cooperation with local colleagues, then dealt with as academic and scientific peers. Being in Africa and having been there repeatedly – and adventurously – has historically been celebrated as a unique experience, essential to the making of African studies. From the true Africanist good and tough stories, and storytelling, is expected. Fourth, we ought to explore ways and methods that, potentially, reposition Africa in the production of knowledge. Here communication technology and the digital turn are the question. In spite of the tendency of many of us to revamp certain forms of Luddism or technophobia (as the reaction to over-digitalization of African sources by the controversial project of the Aluka archive has shown<sup>2</sup>) we have to learn to ride the tiger of these technologies if only because they co-determine the new geopolitics of knowledge defining challenges by new – and no less imperial than the previous ones – politics of storage. Those who are able to store the original document will, to a large extent, call the shots. For this reason, but also on account of their convenience and relatively easy access and mustering we should endeavor on the path of the critical usage of the digital turn. Digital generosity (through the creation of joint virtual/digital museum, collections, libraries and book series), digital repatriation of images and documents. Repatriation is a polemic and growing issue that cuts across North-South relations, but also affects South-South connections because when and if

objects are repatriated to other places from Paris for example, the question is where are they supposed to be taken back to? This is a problem I discussed last year with the then curator of the Ifan Museum in Dakar, Ibrahima Thiaw, and it is an issue the recent speech by French President Macron on repatriation will certainly blast new life in. The digital turn also increases opportunities to test our generosity and altruism through new technical resources for collective curatorship and crowd-sourcing as well as to empower physical and on line journals produced in Africa also by including them in the various indexes and ranking systems. In the same line of thought one can try to empower local networks of (young) scholars (such as those in Mali) and to strengthen graduate studies in Africa itself also by means of partnerships between graduate studies inside and outside the continent with a combination of long distance and face-to-face learning, and the organization of intensive international courses hosted in African universities rather than mostly outside the continent. More experiment can be carried out through digital ethnography, joint Facebook pages, on-line field work (or webcam ethnography, where ethnography in Africa is shared on as well as offline with colleagues from other locations in and outside the continent). These are all methods we should explore and that can help us give African scholars a different and more central position.

In closing, and in trying to answer a key question raised in the position paper of this conference – How can we help to overcome the colonial division of labor between producers of academic knowledge in the Global North and suppliers of information in the Global South? – I suggest a political practice of “normalizing” Africa. By this I mean both taking away the exotic veil from Africa and provincializing the Global North,

in a process and project that is very much in line with Mkandawire’s position, made very clear in his 2010 public lecture, **who with much better authority than I**, has already denounced what can be described as the paradigm of ‘This works everywhere except Africa’, which is the staple diet not only of the press but of a considerable amount of some recent academic writing on Africa (Mkandawire 2010:15). Our African studies (new style), the kind of study this symposium held at the University of Bayreuth where this paper was first presented (see note 1) wants to generate, can benefit from a detox therapy centred on emphasizing similarities, comparisons and general trends, rather than the exceptional nature and fiber of the African continent. In order to try to achieve this goal we could try a number of methods and approaches: comparing research priorities and ethnographic sensibilities of scholars in and outside Africa; creating joint research priorities (inspired by the win-win principle) formed by scholars of similar academic standing (so that the African counterpart is more than just a key informant); achieve African scholars in research projects in and on other continents; testing categories molded in Africa such as “the politics of the belly” or “necropolitics” in other contexts; inflating new life in transnational comparative research on topics of obvious universal relevance such as populism, crime, drug abuse, family change, youth culture, corruption, extreme inequality, violent cities and so forth.

Another example of such detox therapy is asking over and over again why do we do African studies. This is the question we ought to ask ourselves everywhere and at any time, as much as all over Latin America over the last decades we have demanded that Latinamericanists from outside the region explain the motives



and agendas of their interest in our region (much of the rejection of Brazilianists from the side of scholars based in Brazil is based on very much the same motives of the rejection of Africanists in Africa).

Our interest in Africa in Brazil is largely on account of our national soul searching. Africa as a trope has been part and parcel of our history, first as onus later as bonus. Looking at Africa and dealing with African scholars is also a way to get to know ourselves, to decolonize our mind. For us, developing a South-South curiosity is a way to detox from our vertical obsession which posits that everything good comes from the North, in fact such effort can be seen as a late form of Latin American modernism – the process of rethinking our place in the future by adding a new value to the characteristics of our people as well as of popular culture and popular art. We have a clear political interest and we are interested in politically committed good African or Africa-based scholars, not just in any good African scholar. In fact, these are basically the only African scholars we manage to get as visiting scholars: they certainly do not come to us to make any money. For that they have to go elsewhere. African Studies from the South, and certainly from Brazil, seem to have an antidote against one of the most serious shortcomings of conventional scholarship on Africa, that is its exceedingly prescriptive inclination. This is simply because it would be ridiculous to insist on such catch-terms as accountability, governance, sustainability and empowerment as guidance to our research priorities, because in Brazil they are by no truly hollow principles, associated with the pre-Lula period when we were largely dependent on our research from US foundations – who imported and insisted we used such terms.

I am not sure we need African studies, but we certainly need studies in Africa, (also) of Africa and by Africans – on Africa of course, but also on the other continents. We should also ask Africans whether they are interested in our research or, in a more positive mood, which part of the studies on Africa developed outside Africa are relevant to them. On their part African studies centres, and they are mostly outside the continent, should ask themselves how they establish their priorities and have a critical scrutiny of the making of their ethnographic sensibility. It is often embarrassing to notice how little research priorities established elsewhere suit the mood of scholars based in Africa, who are oftentimes obliged to dance to the academic music of African studies in the Global North in order to survive as intellectuals – as we know, being an intellectual in the Global South can be expensive (books, internet, travel, visas are dearer than in other parts of the world). This raises the following question: What is African in African studies? That is, how much and in which way have African studies contributed to improve knowledge production in the African continent or, on the contrary, have made it even more difficult than before? I believe we are all ready for a new moment of synthesis, that mediates and incorporates the best of the tradition of African and even Area studies as well as the best part of the rebellious attitude that scholars based in Africa have developed as from the 50s and that has certainly been important in the first years of CODESRIA, which we can call the period of strategic isolationism or essentialism, to use a concept of Gayatri Spivak (1987).

We have to learn to combine our focus on a region, Africa for that matter, or part of it, with the constant preoccupation with the

naturalization and uncritical use of such geographical focus. It is, of course, a difficult equilibrium, but it is worth trying.

We must also make an effort to make Africa, and theories and research developed somehow from within the continent, relevant for the mainstream of the social sciences and, thus, also for non-specialists. I imagine that scholars based in Africa have much to gain from the acceptance of part of their theories as ideas of universal value as well as by being invited to contribute to research projects of issues such as violence, durable inequalities or the Pentecostal wave in other parts of the world – why not, in Latin America.

Only after doing such therapy can we properly ask questions regarding what is specific to Africa and will eventually be able to produce a new style of African studies.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the international conference Africa Multiple which was held at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, on December 6-8, 2017.
2. The digital archive Aluka ([www.aluka.org](http://www.aluka.org)) started as an independent initiative, but later joined the commercial enterprise JStor.
3. Spivak, Gayatri 1987. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Abingdon (UK): Taylor and Francis.

## References

- Mkandawire, Thandika 2010. "Running While Others Walk: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development". London: London School of Economics.