

## Advanced Institute on African-Arab Relations

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This institute on African-Arab relations will be held alternatively in North Africa and in sub-Saharan Africa. The Institute is conceived as a high-level knowledge-building, agenda-setting and networking forum for scholars in the prime of their careers desirous of experimenting with new fields of knowledge and exploring new conceptual terrains. As an endeavour at generation of new knowledge, the Institute is structured as a multidisciplinary intervention.

Africa is one continent whose peoples share a common position of subalternity in global relations and a number of common historical experiences and cultures. The historical ties and exchanges that exist between Africa and the Arab World are numerous.

Africa has for a long time been bounded in a context defined globally by colonialism and the Cold War, and regionally by the post-1945 consolidation of apartheid. In this configuration, North Africa was said to be a part of "the Orient" and, thus, of the area called "Middle East", while apartheid South Africa was considered an exception to be studied separately. The domain of African Studies came to be developed around the land area between the Sahara and the Limpopo. Socially, Africa was Bantu Africa; spatially, it was equatorial Africa. This notion was, however, never accepted in the post-colonial academy in Africa, including in the programmatic work of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) that emerged as the pioneer and apex African social research organization on the continent.

The post-Cold War and post-apartheid era calls for a careful and sustained problematisation of received boundaries in the study of Africa. It is suggested that this endeavor requires comparative studies which, while thematically focused, deliberately transgress these boundaries with a view to exploring historical terrains that were obscured by the dominant paradigm, and charting new grounds in identity theory and politics. In so doing, it is hoped that the study of African-Arab relations will not only be revitalized but, equally important, that new important insights will be developed that will contribute to a radical re-direction of our reading of African history, sociology and politics away from the hegemonic occidental bias that has been predominant.

The inaugural session of the Institute held in Rabat, Morocco in March 2012 was intended to focus on the changing political economy of Afro-Arab Relations as a point of departure. Up to 10 fellows drawn from across Africa and the Arab World, and from the African and Arab Diaspora, and from different disciplinary backgrounds, were invited to participate in the session convened and led by Prof. Shamil Jeppie, as its Director designated by CODESRIA and SEPHIS the partner in the inaugural session, to offer intellectual leadership and coordinate the output of the fellows into a joint SEPHIS-CODESRIA publication.

The following brief report is a summary of the work done at the first workshop of this institute in Rabat hosted by the Institute of African Studies, of Muhamad V Souissi University, Morocco, March 2012.

### The Changing Political Economy of Afro-Arab Relations

Inaugural Session of the CODESRIA-SEPHIS Advanced Institute on Afro-Arab Relations

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The purpose of the inaugural session was to focus on the historical and contemporary dimensions of the relations between people conventionally called "Arab" and "African."

These terms are enormous and often without much specific content. They have assumed qualities that place them at antagonistic and opposite ends. The most recent example is the conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan, which was cast in the international media and by western think-tanks as an African versus Arab conflict. The workshop was hosted to explore a great variety of forms that this relationship takes. The workshop opened with a panel devoted to the polemics employed in popular and academic discussions about this Arab versus African relationship.

In geographical extent, the workshop examined North Africa and the Sahara, East Africa, especially *coastal* East Africa, and the Nile valley. In these areas the participants discussed relations in historical terms and more current dynamics.

In order to understand the development of the relationships, it was necessary to devote some time to examine the late antique and medieval period and related dynamics of exchanges between peoples in Africa and Southwest Asia, where the Arabic language developed and which became a major marker of Arab identity. This period also witnessed the rise of Islam and its spread in Asia and Africa. Therefore, extended discus-

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sions were held on the origins of the relations, the languages of contact, and the nature of religious diversity and competition.

Time was also spent on understanding the rise of nationalism and the ideologies of pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism. Finally, the participants also examined the political economy of Afro-Arab relations, and the origins and impact of the "Arab Spring". These sessions were solidly based in the twentieth-century dynamics up to the present. The exchanges were particularly animated because of their relevance across the continent and the Middle East. There are still many areas that have not been closely studied and these will be subjects of future workshops of the institute. There need to pay attention to prospective ways of developing strong economic and political relations across the divides.

One of the achievements of this workshop was the persistent questioning of the categorizing North Africa as part of the Middle East. For instance, two-thirds of Arabs live in Africa yet there is often a perception, even by Arabs, that they are exterior to the continent! Possibly a more productive way of thinking about the question would be to frame it in terms of "Africa and its regions" in which, for instance, a focus on North Africa and the continent will have special questions including "Afro-Arab" ones. We could think of how a workshop on "West Africa and the continent" or "Southern Africa and the continent" would turn out.