

## The future of African Studies

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# The future of African Studies: What we can do to keep Africa at the heart of our research

Insa Nolte<sup>1</sup>

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Over the past two decades, Africa has returned to the academic agenda outside of the continent. At the same time, the field of African Studies has come under increasing criticism for its marginalisation of African voices, interests, and agendas (cf. Medie & Kang 2018). A highly visible and yet seemingly intractable division of labour has emerged between academics based across Africa and those based outside the continent. While some of the most prominent scholars in our field are of African origin, the current landscape of scholarly labour tends to reduce the relative presence of voices by African scholars, often muting or even silencing them.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the intellectual labour of scholars based outside of Africa, usually in the parts of Europe or North America collectively referred to as the 'West' or the 'global North', retains a privileged position. This discourages an engagement with Africa as a place of significant intellectual production in its own right.

This article argues that while the exclusion and marginalisation of African scholars has complex historical roots, it also reflects more recent changes to academic practice in universities both in Africa and outside of the continent. For scholars based in the UK and at other non-African institutions, an active and pro-African engagement with existing academic structures therefore needs to be based on a reflection of the conditions that contribute to a growing gap between research produced by scholars in African and non-African institutions. As in all academic disciplines, the working practices and experiences that anchor our intellectual labour legitimise the questions we ask and the methodologies that produce empirical facts, theoretical insights, and other forms of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted below, the text of this article is based on my presidential address at the 2018 ASAUK conference in Birmingham on 13 September 2018. My argument benefited greatly from my participation in a panel on 'Ethical Collaborations: North-South flows' at the same conference on 12 September 2018, which was organised by Carli Coetzee and also included Divine Fuh, Toby Green, David Kerr, Ambreena Manji, Caroline Mose, Grace Musila, Duncan Omanga, and Ola Uduku. I am also grateful for comments by Reginald Cline-Cole, Marco Di Nunzio, Leslie Fesenmyer, Juliet Gilbert, Rebecca Jones, Laura Martin, Benedetta Rossi, and Kate Skinner.

<sup>2</sup> By African scholars I refer to scholars based on the African continent. African diaspora scholars and other scholars of African origin play an important role for the intellectual engagement with Africa, and often face constraints based on misrecognition and discrimination. Although some scholars move seamlessly between positions in Africa and outside the continent, the differentiation is useful to explore the environments and constraints of research in African institutions.

Focusing on our ability as scholars to transform academic debate on Africa, this article also highlights the possibilities for alternative practices and approaches. It emphasises that, even though institutional processes encourage certain forms of research, we have personal control over many aspects of our work. We also have collective agency as academics, and through academic institutions such as journals, funding bodies, and Learned Societies including African Studies Associations, and even as activists and lobbyists. The article invites both African and non-African scholars to take ownership of a debate that recognises and engages with the divisions in our field rather than naturalising and perpetuating them. By drawing on the ethical and intellectual discourses that underpin our commitment to learning about Africa, we can share our experiences and expectations of respectful exchange with a view to transforming them.

This article reflects my own experiences and reflections as a European immigrant to the UK, and as a UK-based scholar of Nigerian and especially Yorùbá history and culture. After a first degree in Berlin, I spent most of my academic career in the UK academic system, and in particular in the collaborative and interdisciplinary atmosphere of the Department for African Studies and Anthropology (formerly Centre of West African Studies) at the University of Birmingham. My thoughts are equally shaped by my research focus on Nigeria, which has enabled me to join different academic networks over the course of my career. As an honorary member of staff at Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, I have had the privilege of sharing some experiences and points of debate with Nigerian colleagues.

Drawing on the diverse and yet highly particular influences that have shaped my own intellectual trajectory, I do not presume to represent an objective view on Africa, or on African Studies as a global field. I am uncomfortable with the fact that discourses about 'Africa' often obscure the diversity and dynamic that characterises life in many parts of the continent. I am also aware that African Studies as a field has long been characterised by a focus on countries south of the Sahara – a focus this article does not transcend. Finally, a general focus on differences between 'African' and 'non-African' scholars disregards the significant differences between university systems within Europe, between the UK and US, and between the study of Africa in the 'West' and Asia or South America. And finally, many of us, including myself, work across a range of different settings. Even so, generalisations about Africa – and scholarship from Africa – are also uncomfortable because they reflect historical and structural differences that continue to shape our work as academics. As the terms central to this analysis reflect both the wider inequalities that have produced African Studies as a field and our ability to engage with them, I understand my discomfort with them as unavoidable.

The text of this article is based on my presidential address at the 2018 ASAUK conference in Birmingham on 13 September 2018. While I am delighted that the

conference was able to attract and support the attendance of 188 scholars from across Africa, most conference delegates were, like myself, based in institutions outside the continent. Much of my argument is shaped by conversations with, and publications by, African scholars, but for obvious reasons I cannot offer a view grounded in an Africa-based academic trajectory. My reflections on how we need to change our practices are therefore primarily directed at colleagues based in universities in the UK and other European or North American countries. They may however resonate with scholars at certain institutions on the continent, including South Africa. Clearly, the article cannot provide an exhaustive discussion of scholarly practice, and nor will all the issues highlighted here be relevant for all parts of a highly diverse field. But by emphasising the collaborative nature of all knowledge production, the article invites all scholars to reflect on our engagement with different cultures and regions of Africa in the context of the institutional structures that shape this engagement. Our willingness to reflect on academic methods and agendas in the context of the conditions that shape academic lives is central to our ability to transform what we do.

The next two sections of the article provide an overview of the history of African Studies, first tracing the debates and political constellations that have shaped African Studies in the UK and beyond from the 1960s to the 1990s, and then discussing how more recent changes in Higher Education have recast relationships between African scholars and academics based outside of Africa. The second part of the article sets out how we can challenge the divisions of labour that have been encouraged by this process, and highlights the need to emphasise the importance of mutual respect both individually and collectively.

### *Decolonisation and the rise and fall of African Studies*

Reflecting the predominantly European origins of contemporary academic disciplines, most early knowledge about Africa was closely linked to the slave trade and later to the colonial and political projects of the UK and its mostly (but not exclusively) European political rivals (cf. Zeleza 2009: 120-2). While most African countries have been independent for nearly as long as they were colonised, the legacies of these unequal encounters continue to reverberate, not least because Africans and members of the African diaspora continue to be affected in multiple ways by racist fantasies and projections (cf. Eddo-Lodge 2017). Attention to the trajectories of the past – and their silencing in different contexts – must therefore remain an important aspect of all scholars' engagement with Africa.

Colonial forms of knowledge production about Africa were transformed by the anticipation of independence across most of Africa following the Second World War. As a part of the world that was not directly involved in the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s, many Africans saw their continent as an alternative to both

West and East. African politicians like Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Leopold Senghor rejected the assumptions that underpinned European rule in Africa and suggested that the continent's ability to pursue its citizens' economic and political wellbeing was dependent on Africans' self-knowledge (Gordon 2005).

The discourses emanating from Africa at independence inspired scholars around the world to challenge debates that refused to acknowledge, or even explicitly denigrated, Africa. The most dramatic disputes in the UK involved anti-colonial historians like Thomas Hodgkin and Basil Davidson, who successfully challenged notions that, without documentary evidence similar to that referred to by historians of Europe, African history had to be dismissed.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Dike drove the disciplinary debate forward by promoting the use of oral evidence and emphasising the importance of Africa's internal dynamics. Scholars like Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Djibril Tamsir Niane, Betwell Allan Ogot, Jacob Ajayi, Adu Boahen, and Ali Mazrui played an important role in addressing the wider ignorance about African history, in particular through the UNESCO's General History of Africa, launched in 1964.

The end of colonialism also transformed academic relationships between Africa and Europe. In the aftermath of the Second World War, African scholars built up a Higher Education sector on the continent that pioneered the self-confident study of African history and culture. Partly in the desire not to lose expertise on Africa to these new institutions, several UK Universities established African Studies Centres in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Recognising the limitations of Western disciplinary approaches to Africa, interdisciplinarity became the intellectual norm in the field. Collegial networks across continents reflected shared intellectual or theoretical commitments. Linking up scholars across the UK, but also including the Africa-based scholars with whom they engaged in debate and collaboration, the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK) was founded in 1963. The Association quickly attracted several hundred members and a first annual conference held in Birmingham in 1964 was attended by 79 members, plus fifteen guests and observers (Fage 1989: 404-9).

By the mid-1970s, however, the tide was turning. Following the often unrealistic expectations associated with political independence, the realisation that the slave trade and colonialism had left lasting legacies led to a re-evaluation of Africa's history and future. Walter Rodney, who was educated in Jamaica and London

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<sup>3</sup> This argument was notoriously put forward by Hugh Trevor-Roper, then Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> This included the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh in 1962, the Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1963, the Centre of African Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the Centre of African Studies at the University of Cambridge in 1965.

before teaching in Tanzania and then returning to Jamaica, argued that Europe's wealth was derived from the active underdevelopment of Africa (Rodney 1972). Building on his insights, scholars of African societies played an important role in understanding the long-term differences between Europe and Africa as part of global patterns of inequality and domination. Such approaches in turn inspired new approaches to the dynamics of transformation in African societies 'from below' (cf. Alpers and Roberts 2002).

The engagement with Africa 'from below' also resonated with wider debates about the possibilities of understanding, and representing, marginalised groups in an academic context dominated by culturally European ideas and practices (cf. Spivak 1976). Deconstructionist approaches contributed to a growing debate about the processes through which hegemonic ideas of Africa were created (Zezeza 2009: 127). Scholars began to recognise that monologic conceptions of truth, evidence and data prevented them from engaging with the assumptions and ideas that shaped lives in different parts of Africa at a basic level.

However, declining investment in the study of Africa limited the reach of such questions at the time. Crucially, the introduction of overseas tuition fees also reduced the UK's appeal to African students, not least because during Africa's 'lost decade' of the 1980s, unfavourable exchange rates meant that study or research trips to Europe or the US became unaffordable. While some African Studies Centres benefited from investments aimed at maintaining Britain's commercial and diplomatic links with Africa (Fage 1989: 412-3), most reinvented themselves, usually by expanding disciplinary undergraduate provision, and often through a theoretical focus on Development. In the UK and elsewhere, even established scholars who had begun their academic careers by focusing on Africa moved towards more comparative and generalised approaches.

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, both political and academic interest largely focused on the former communist world. Reflecting on the ostensible success of global capitalism in the 1990s, economists and development experts shifted emphasis from the control of market forces to their liberation. Poverty on the African continent came to be seen as an apparent failure of self-reliance. In popular and academic discourse, Africa was increasingly understood as a continent in crisis (cf. Hyden 1996). This implied that it had little to offer to those who studied it.

The decline of UK academic interest in Africa from the 1970s was partly balanced by increasing interest in Africa in the US, where the field of African Studies had originally largely excluded Africans or African-Americans (Allman, ASA 2018 Presidential Lecture). However, following the Civil Rights Movement, scholars from more diverse backgrounds began to assert the validity of their engagements with Africa (cf. Yelvington 2018). This helped to attract African scholars to the US, who were often linked to the continent through personal and family ties, and

embedded in research networks with strong roots on the African continent. Scholars of African origin were indispensable to the emergence of Africana Studies, which combined a focus on both the African continent and its diasporas (cf. Zeleza 2004; Olukoshi 2006: 534).

In the UK, a combination of personal idealism and access to excellent research resources enabled some established scholars to maintain their focus on the African continent. With a new generation taking on the leadership of the Royal African Society, a joint membership agreement with the African Studies Association of the UK ensured the ongoing financial viability of the ASUK. But more importantly, the internationalisation of Higher Education also brought excellent African academics to the UK. While this group remained relatively small (cf. McCracken 1993: 243), scholars including Raufu Mustapha, Ola Uduku, Tunde Zack-Williams and Reginald Cline-Cole developed traditions of scholarship that aimed to hold Africa's new political elites to account, helped to normalise the study of Africa in areas where the continent had previously been ignored, and, like in the US, affirmed the study of Africa's diasporas as part of African Studies.

### *Africa's ambivalent return to non-African research agendas*

By the early 2000s, the realisation that the end of the Cold War would not automatically produce a more peaceful world facilitated greater interest in Africa both in European and North America. Growing Chinese and Asian investment in Africa stirred political and economic anxieties that pointed to the continent's political and economic importance. At the same time, new developments on the continent, from the return to majority and civilian rule in many African states to the blossoming of the so-called Third Wave of African literature, inspired a new generation of researchers. Equally, the realisation that Africa will be home to the largest number of young people by 2050 has confirmed its centrality for global demography.

In the UK, the continent has also become a more important focus as Britain seeks to recast its position in the world following its decision in 2016 to leave the European Union. The growing political interest in Africa is reflected in the growth of relevant conferences, networks, journals and publications, supported by old and new funding streams. The establishment of the Global Challenges Research Fund in 2015, which supports development-oriented research on and in countries eligible for Overseas Development Assistance from the UK, has further expanded opportunities for academic research. While it is important to engage critically with both funding rationales and practices (Manji & Mandler 2018), the recognition of the importance of the world's second largest, youngest, and second most-populous continent for the UK it is both welcome and reassuring.

The growing national and international interest in Africa has revived African Studies Associations across the world. Central to the success of the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) in bringing together scholars across European borders, it has also significantly contributed to the expansion of the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK). The ASAUK's 2000 biennial conference attracted over a hundred delegates attending 26 panels, and in 2018, the same conference accommodated over 800 delegates and 166 panels. Similarly, members of the Association reported the completion of altogether five doctoral theses and 16 books on Africa to the ASAUK Newsletter on 2000. In 2018 the same Newsletter listed 99 successful doctoral theses and announced the publication of 43 books (ASAUK Newsletter 2000a-d, 2018a-d).

The changing external environment for Higher Education also created opportunities for scholarship on Africa. In the UK and elsewhere, universities were no longer seen solely as a priority in their own right but as institutions that contributed to the achievement of politically determined goals, such as the growth of business, innovation, and skills. Universities came to be identified as key drivers of a newly defined knowledge society, and thus became service providers rather than producers of knowledge for its own sake (McArthur 2011). In the context of growing political interest in Africa, both the abolition of student number control in 2012 and the incentive for universities to grow their income expanded possibilities for researchers and institutions keen to maintain or develop a research focus on the continent.

At the same time, the landscape of academic collaboration shifted, because the introduction of market-inspired principles transformed the interpersonal dynamics of knowledge production. The long-term evolution of research funding away from posts to grants has meant that fixed-term and part-time contracts have become the norm for early career academics (Baez and Boyles 2009). As these structural changes contributed to greater precarity within academia, both in the UK and elsewhere, they challenged the ability to maintain the long-term academic networks, collaborations, and relationships that are often foundational to truly innovative research. Equally, many colleagues feel pressured to weigh the cost of collegiality and inclusivity against the imperative of producing the deliverables that determine their ability to obtain the next grant.

This trend has been reinforced by an increasingly divided publication landscape. As online publication and availability made international communication and debate easier from the 1990s onwards, English was confirmed as the main language of contemporary academic production. Anglophone journals largely based in the UK and North America continued to internationalise in organisation and orientation. In contrast, most African journals outside of South Africa continued to be primarily available in print. The growing divisions between ostensibly 'local' (i.e. African-published) and 'international' scholarship have been



naturalised in both African and non-African discourses, even though they reconstitute non-Africans as experts on the continent in a manner that reproduces colonial and racial hierarchies.

At the same time, the under-representation of African academics in the UK academy persists (cf. *The Guardian*, 7 September 2018). Academics from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds are not only disadvantaged by bias and discrimination, but also by narrow curricula that marginalise research questions central to the experiences of staff and students from such backgrounds (cf. RHS, 18 October 2018). Beyond the study of African societies, the ongoing emphasis on methods and epistemologies rooted in Euro-American traditions means that insights about the world beyond the continent are rarely shaped by African scholars. This falsely suggests that, as Sadia Qureshi sums up caustically, ‘white men write about universal truths while people of colour are only expert in a narrow field – usually to do with questions of their identity and heritage’ (Qureshi, 22 Nov 2018).

As new funding structures encourage more hierarchical relationships between junior and senior staff, they also increase the differences between African scholars and those based in the UK and elsewhere outside of Africa. Yet it would be misleading to understand existing inequalities solely as a result of changes in the UK and other non-African environments. In many African countries, the decline of government support, the privatisation of higher education, and the decrease of relative academic incomes, have had stark effects. In some contexts, academic life was also significantly affected by the fact that large numbers of scholars emigrated to the US or elsewhere (Furniss 2005: 447).

Although working conditions for African scholars vary greatly depending on their institution and country, the overall disparities between scholars in African and non-African countries influence opportunities, working conditions, and publishing patterns (Nyamnjoh 2004). By tending to exclude African scholars, these differences affect both the interpersonal relationships that constitute collegiate networks and the practical and theoretical orientations that sustain such networks (cf. Guyer 1996). This has had an intellectually conservative effect, and while many scholars are aware of the disconnect between the ideas that dominate academic debate and the understandings that shape African lives and communities, we need to do more to address it. The remainder of this article sets out how we can develop grounded approaches that sustain and validate the engagement with such ‘epistemic disarticulations’ (Musila 2017).

### *Rethinking the divide between empirical and theoretical research*

The growing division of labour between African scholars and those based outside the continent is at least partly linked to the constraints shaping competitive

research funding. Most funding bodies are embedded in a national or regional institutional landscape, and decisions about what constitutes research quality are likely to reflect the discourses and concerns relevant at that level. Especially where grants are disbursed predominantly in responsive mode and submitted at short notice, funded research is therefore likely to reflect epistemologies understood as relevant by the funding institutions (cf. Chubb and Watermeyer 2017).

Research funding is not exclusively provided by funders based outside of Africa. Most importantly for the field of African Studies as it is currently constituted, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) provides significant resources for research by African social scientists, which is complemented in some parts of Africa by more regionally focused organisations.<sup>5</sup> Most African universities support research, and many countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa offer significant funding to researchers at national levels. However, as university finances are linked to per capita income across the world, the resources available to African researchers tend to reflect the relative economic position of the continent (cf. Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2018).

The dominance of funding based outside of Africa politicises the ostensible difference between empirical and theoretical work. Prevailing funding perspectives constitute those who understand the epistemological expectations of funders as thinkers and theorists. In the context of funding for collaborative research, this means that questions about Africa are framed in the context of debates relevant in those countries, but not necessarily in Africa (cf. Mamdani 1989). Once theoretical concepts are widely accepted, it is conceptually easy to conceive of empirical research as primarily confirming or illuminating aspects of such concepts. This logic encourages arrangements whereby African researchers contribute to larger research projects as research assistants or consultants who provide the relevant empirical evidence, while 'external Africanists' interpret Africa to the world, and vice versa (Olukoshi 2006: 533).

A growing emphasis on the socio-economic benefit, or impact, of research has encouraged the emergence of a research culture more directly engaged with social concerns, but it has also contributed to an instrumentalisation of academic labour. In addition to limiting academics' ability to engage critically with certain sectors of society, the 'impact agenda' puts researchers under pressure to produce research whose social benefit is easily recognisable to funding agencies and research evaluators (cf. Chubb and Watermeyer 2017). This means that in collaborative research endeavours, academics based on the African continent are often pushed into roles as facilitators of impact, which is however measured according to external standards.

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<sup>5</sup> This includes the West African Research Association (WARA), and the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA).

Where such divisions of labour become naturalised, they impose severe limitations on the production of knowledge because they encourage the 'extraversion' of research, i.e. a focus on theoretical questions and political concerns that arise outside of Africa (Hountondji 2009: 128). This process often goes hand in hand with a silencing of conceptual categories of African origin, thus further reducing wider academic discourse to English (cf. Coetzee 2013). In this way, Africa is treated as little more than a 'reservoir of raw fact', which is made to fit the theories and truths produced on the basis of European and North American knowledge and praxis (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 1).

In order not to understand developments and processes on the African continent 'extractively', i.e. through the mining of data that is then understood through apparently objective models that originate elsewhere, researchers need to engage in depth with the complex challenges and achievements of African individuals and communities (Ndhlovu 2008). The most natural starting point for scholars committed to engaging with African debates is to read the work produced by their Africa-based colleagues.

Importantly, all engagements with African texts must be based on close and critical readings. Where texts by African authors appear to have little direct bearing on the theoretical concerns that dominate debate outside of Africa, non-African scholars must resist the temptation to understand them only as empirical or source material. As scholars we recognise that we cannot understand social phenomena without paying attention to the debates and ideas from which they emerge. Just as all scholars engage critically with historical or political sources about Africa, often reading them against the conventions of their time and place, we must assess the texts produced by all colleagues within the context of the wider debates of which they are part (cf. Barber 2007).

Importantly, globally marginalised debates afford an epistemologically privileged foundation from which one can 'rethink hegemonic forms of knowledge in mainstream research' (Adams 2014: 471). The engaged reading of, and reflection on, the scholarship of African colleagues is confirmed by the incorporation of such scholarship in research projects and grant applications – incidentally, not only in research about Africa! But if our research on Africa implies that scholars based on the African continent have not made any meaningful contributions to its study, it is particularly important that we reflect carefully on possible reasons for this.

The engagement with African scholarship also needs to illuminate our publications. As Carli Coetzee notes, bibliographies and citations reflect on our scholarship because they 'are a clear and transparent way of showing who is invested in a certain kind of knowledge, and in whom we in turn invest' (2018: 108). Collectively, low levels of citation of African scholars reflect on disciplinary relations of power because they suggest that their voices 'do not command attention', including in debates about the continent on which they are based

(Briggs and Weathers 2016: 471). The same logic applies to teaching, and to requesting books and access to journals based on the African continent through UK libraries. Once such literature is available, its presence can encourage and enable students and colleagues to expand their own reading practices.

Whether based outside of Africa or not, as researchers we must also share the experience of empirical research. Our physical presence in different research contexts exposes us to crises that are salutary for our understanding of the experiences of the subjects of our research (Cramer et al 2015: 159). This can include the practical challenges involved in obtaining food and (hot) water, reliable public transport, and internet access as well as the difficulties that may arise out of having to negotiate complex social and political environments. At the same time, empirical research offers tacit insights ranging from the experience of the bodily practices that shape everyday interactions to the jokes that both suspend and confirm appropriate social relationships (Douglas 1975). The importance of an empirically grounded understanding of the places and communities we research lies in the ambient and non-disciplinary nature of personal experience, and in its ability to disrupt our assumptions.

Equally importantly, most empirical research requires researchers to have at least a working knowledge of African language(s) and sociolects, including local Creoles or 'Pidgins'. In order not to silence those African groups and individuals whom our research seeks to understand, we need to recognise the categories and insights such languages offer to African groups and individuals (Ngũgĩ 2000). As many Africans speak several African languages, or a combination of African and European languages, we also need to engage with the overlapping meanings that are created in multilingual settings to understand how the subjects of our research themselves conceptualise their actions and beliefs.

In many cases, the slippage between conceptualisations on the ground and academic research questions is intellectually productive. A sustained engagement with the practices, debates, and concepts mobilised in different African settings enables us to re-assess our own ideas, practices and positionalities (Henderson, 2009). The reflexive and transformative nature of knowledge production confirms not only the importance of ongoing exchanges with African academics and intellectuals, but also the need to engage critically with 'current metanarratives' of research (Englund and Leach 2000, see also Fage 1989: 400-3).

### *Encouraging reciprocity and collaboration in academic publication*

As the growing division of scholarly labour was accompanied by the emergence of 'international' and 'local' categories of publication, ongoing changes in academic

publication continue to transform publishing practice in highly diverse ways. In addition to a large number of ‘international’ journals from South Africa, an increasing number of journals from Eastern and West Africa fall into this category – both because they are easily accessible online and because they offer their readers cutting edge content. However, in many UK and US universities, academic careers are not furthered by publication in Africa-based journals. In contrast, many African universities request that academics publish in both ‘local’ and ‘international’ – or, in Nigerian parlance, ‘on-shore’ and ‘off shore’ – journals. As a result, the intellectual labour of engaging with different discourses and publishing paradigms is primarily borne by African scholars.

Although African scholars published more articles than their British colleagues in some UK-based journals during the 1980s and in the early 1990s (McCracken 1993: 242-4), the number of articles by African authors published in UK and other international journals has dramatically declined since then. Recent research on publishing in the field of African politics suggests that the share of articles by Africa-based scholars has fallen from about 25 percent to ca. 15 percent between 1993 and 2013 (Briggs & Weathers 2016: 485). As Africa-based publishers have been operating under severe constraints since the 1980s (Bgoya 2014), African scholars are becoming increasingly peripheral to the study of their own continent in many supposedly international debates (Pailey, 7 June 2016).

The asymmetric publication landscape partly reflects the differences between the working conditions of scholars based on the continent and those based elsewhere. While many African academics have adopted ingenious strategies for research and publication that rely on both external and local resources (Olukoju 2002), excellent research is sometimes consciously limited or appropriated by vested interests – including, at times, Government (Arowosegbe 2016, Adebaniwi 2016, Ogen & Nolte 2016). Non-African researchers committed to empirical research also come under pressure from African politicians or businesses (Cramer et al. 2015), but their institutions are far less likely than those of their African colleagues to be affected by such interventions.

Scholars, publishers, and librarians whose work focuses on Africa have recognised these changes as a threat to scholarship. The Association of African Universities has emphasised the need to renew investment into the sector, and in countries ranging from Nigeria to South Africa, Higher Education has received increased government funding. Starting in 2004, the African Studies Association of the UK began to work closely with institutions such as funders, the British Council, Universities UK, and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, to develop new frameworks for Africa-UK collaboration (Furniss 2005). While such initiatives have initiated highly useful conversations (cf. Association of Commonwealth Universities, “The Nairobi Process”), much remains to be done.

Global initiatives to provide free or reduced-cost online access to scholarship to low-income countries and ongoing software development have vastly increased the possibilities for research in many African countries. Even so, many African academics only access virtual technologies and research platforms with difficulty. Also, while Open Access publication can make a powerful difference to African scholars, it comes with costs as well as benefits (Mandler 2014). An elegant way of ensuring mutual access to literature for institutions in collaborative networks and projects is to set up Shared Access to (online) library resources. This could easily be achieved if funders and policy makers emphasised the need for such reciprocity. However, even the most comprehensive Open or Shared Access policy means little if low-bandwidth internet access imposes significant costs on online searches (Olukoshi 2006: 537-40).

In many contexts, the growing pressure to publish also means that scholars tend to compare or generalise rather than to explore their material in depth. While generalising approaches may ostensibly offer wider or more theoretical insights, recourse to widely accepted abstract arguments can also enable researchers to gloss over a lack of local knowledge and language skills. In such contexts, what appears as a theoretically engaged discussion can simply be a shortcut to filling gaps of knowledge and structuring bewildering evidence, in order to ensure publication (cf. *The Guardian*, 30 June 2017). Thus the pressure to publish can act as an effective censorship of diversity (Waters 2004).

An emphasis on 'theory' also contributes to the declining acceptance rates of African scholars by emphasising theoretical debates at the expense of in-depth knowledge. In the field of politics, Briggs and Weathers note that articles by African-based authors in international Politics journals tend to be more focused on individual countries and communities while non-African scholars tend to produce more comparative work and also generalise more (2016: 485-6). The de-facto difficulties faced by many African scholars in accessing books and journal articles mean that they can find it harder to position their work in the wider field and to engage with the theoretical arguments that dominate international debates. This doubly undermines scholarly discourse, first because it reduces African authored publications, and second because it insulates scholars like myself from the scrutiny of our African peers.

As reviewers and editors of most international journals, non-African scholars often determine what gets published. Similar concerns apply to editors of Special Issues or edited collections published outside of Africa. Even where individuals are open to competing perspectives, the limited views of what constitutes valid scholarship may rule out submissions from the continent (Nyamnjoh 2004). Including larger numbers of African editors and reviewers into the global publishing landscape would be an important step forward. Seeing an African name or affiliation among editors' names would help journals to reach out to Africa-based authors who might

not have considered submitting their work there. This is particularly important for journals with low numbers of African-authored articles, whose African readers may have formed the opinion – rightly or wrongly – that their texts would not be welcome.

Including larger numbers of African editors and reviewers could also help to develop reviewing practices that encourage all authors to recognise and address the gaps in their research (Coetzee 2018). A pro-African editorial policy must include more active strategies towards increasing the number of African authors. It may be appropriate in some cases to aim for a minimum quota of African-authored articles, and in others to insist on active support from publishers and reviewers. Thus journal editors could specify that reviews suggesting revision should include lists of further reading, and include pdfs or photocopies of recommended texts. Beyond that, it would be a clear recognition of publishers' corporate responsibilities to make their publications freely available to authors whose work is under review.<sup>6</sup>

Given that African scholars are often forced to publish in their second or third language, it may be reasonable for journals or publishers to make additional copy-editing funds available to authors for whom English is not a first language. A pro-African editorial policy would also emphasise the importance of engaging with African languages and debates. It is therefore important for journal editors not only to support authors of single-case research to draw out its wider implications. They equally need to interrogate authors of comparative or theoretical research about the degree to which they have taken the concepts and practices of different linguistic, cultural, and historical groups into account.

One way of actively soliciting African contributions is the organisation of writing workshops: since 2009, the African Studies Association of the UK has organised writing workshops aimed at African authors, usually in African countries, where African scholars work in intensive sessions with editors of international journals in order to produce papers that will be ready, or near-ready, for publication. Similar workshops have been organised by numerous Africa-focused journals, the African Studies Association of the US, and the African Studies Association of Africa.

But it is also reasonable to expect that scholars outside of Africa submit their work to journals and collections published on the African continent. Many Africa-based journals reach significant audiences online, while also being actively circulated in print form to local libraries during departmental research seminars and conferences. Positions as reviewers or editorial board members of Africa-based

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<sup>6</sup> A good example of the recognition of such corporate responsibility is the STAR initiative, which currently offers researchers in Africa, South Asia, and many parts of South East Asia free access to up to 50 publications by Taylor and Francis for up to a year.

journals will enable scholars outside the continent to participate actively in scholarly debates in the countries of their research.

For books and monographs, all scholars should consider co-publication with African publishers from the very beginning. While there is no one-size fits all solution, it is often possible to come to mutually beneficial arrangements if such ambitions are raised early on in conversations with publishers, and if authors are committed to advertising and popularising their work on the continent.<sup>7</sup> As producing an African edition can involve difficult negotiations, UK universities could encourage collaborative publication strategies by recognising the importance of texts published in areas of scholars' research in research strategies, promotion panels, and in the context of the UK's Research Excellence Framework's engagement with (African) Area Studies.

### *Building networks of respectful exchange*

The inequalities that shape academic life in different parts of the world mean that African and non-African scholars are affected differently by the conditions that govern international or collaborative research. Importantly, collaboration between the UK and Africa is hampered by restrictions on scholarly travel that affect African scholars disproportionately. Visa refusals are humiliating and discouraging for African colleagues who are often planning to travel to the UK at significant expense to themselves or their departments. They are also painfully embarrassing to UK-based scholars like myself, not least because we are deprived of being able to return the hospitality we so often enjoy when we visit the countries of our research.

It is extremely worrying to see the refusal of visas to academic colleagues who have absolutely no intention of staying in this country, and who have credible funding arrangements in place. In many cases, decision-making in relation to visas shows an unacceptable bias, both by gender and by nationality. Since 2016, the US has seen a steep drop in visas that has disproportionately affected Muslims, immigrants of colour, and people from Africa (*Politico*, 4 March 2018), but visa

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<sup>7</sup> To make co-publication in Africa easier for their members, African Studies Associations in the US and UK are currently involved in the negotiation and formulation of an 'Statement of Principles' which commits publishers who sign up to it to making available – for a fee – the pdfs of books on African countries to publishers in those countries. See "Statement of Principles for the Sale of Rights in African Territories", accessed 9 September 2018 from <http://www.asauk.net/activities/policy-engagement/>. It would be helpful to follow up with a similar conversation enabling African publishers to find outlets for co-publication in Europe.



regimes in Europe and Canada have also increasingly disadvantaged Africans.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, even as the African Union's ambition to establish free movement for all Africans, originally planned for 2018, has made intra-continental travel easier, some nations – including South Africa and Nigeria – continue to require visas from a majority of African countries (*BBC News*, 8 October 2018). Such practices undermine the free academic exchange that is foundational to the ability to pursue intellectual ambitions and research agendas relevant to Africans.

In the UK, this matter is too important to simply seek relief in voicing our concerns among friends and colleagues, or on social media: as in other fields of academic concern, we must act to call out and challenge existing practices. Importantly, we have a collective voice not only as members of civil society and voters, but also through our professional institutions, including a wide network of African Studies Associations around the world. Since 2016, the ASUK has served as a hub for visa complaints and concerns, and it exchanges information on this issue with other African Studies Associations in the world. It is working closely with the Royal African Society and the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Africa to highlight how visa refusals and delays affected our African colleagues and our shared commitment to the study of the continent.<sup>9</sup> Without detracting from the need to provide individual support to our African colleagues during visa applications, our membership and participation of African Studies Associations in the UK and elsewhere strengthens the collective voice for the reform of current visa practices.

We also need to recognise that scholars from Africa are affected in often unforeseen ways by rules and regulations originally established in the UK, Europe, or North America. In the UK, research funders tend to subject scholars and institutions across the globe to exactly the same conditions. While this is appropriate in many cases, the insistence of funders that the operational, ethical, and financial documentation and processes of African universities match that of UK institutions implies that the processes that have been developed in different African contexts are not trustworthy or adequate. The standardisation of practices that have emerged in the UK context for Africa reconfigures relations of power as relations of competence. In this context, too, the failure to recognise the inequalities that shape academic work not only naturalises but reproduces existing disparities (Adams 2014).

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Guardian*, 26 September 2017 [for UK visa practice]; Schengen Visa Information, 10 April 2018 [for Schengen countries]; *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 9 July 2018 [for Canada].

<sup>9</sup> Based on its experiences with visa denials at the 2018 conference in Birmingham, the ASUK produced an official report to the APPG for Africa (African Studies Association of the UK, January 2019).

In my personal experience, the notion that scholars everywhere work under the same conditions can lead to absurd situations. A typical example is the provision by many funders that clothing is not an acceptable research expense. In one case this meant that Nigerian scholars with whom I attended an African Studies conference held in Indianapolis in November 2014 were unable to claim back expenses for warm coats, appropriate shoes, hats, scarves, and gloves from the funder of our joint research.<sup>10</sup> Similar provisions also apply to American or European researchers working in Africa, but the relatively high cost of warm clothing, its lack of use value in tropical parts of the world, and the often significant differences in income mean that such provisions often affect African and non-African scholars very differently. In the case above, both my Nigerian colleagues and I experienced the notionally equal treatment of all scholars as contributing to the de-facto, if unintended, financial disadvantage of many African scholars.

International mobility is a key ingredient not only to our discipline but to research and education in general. Yet the assumption that research environments outside of Africa offer a better base for research on Africa is misleading. While African scholars who spend time at non-African institutions often benefit from access to well-resourced libraries and participation in wider debates about Africa, non-African scholars tend to gain deeper insights into university life and politics in the countries of their research. This in turn makes it easier for them to engage with research produced in these countries on its own terms.

So while it is wonderful to see that the number of graduate scholarships and opportunities specifically reserved for African scholars in the UK has increased in recent years, it is worrying that many UK-based graduate students can only spend short periods of time in Africa. Split-site PhD programmes or co-supervision arrangements could contribute to the emergence of a new generation of younger scholars whose research networks epitomise the collaborative nature of African Studies. In a sector driven strongly by market considerations, such initiatives would however require significant commitment from the relevant funding agencies.

Teaching Fellowships, Research Fellowships, and Knowledge Exchange programmes can also enable early career scholars from outside Africa to gain experience at an African university. Established scholars can apply to hold honorary or visiting positions in African universities. Where such appointments come with real commitments to graduate and undergraduate teaching, programme development, or administration, they offer unique insights into the debates and conditions that shape academic practice on the continent.

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to the funder for engaging with this point in a very thoughtful manner, and with a view to changing future practice. I also appreciate that the College of Arts and Law at the University of Birmingham agreed to cover the research expenses of my Nigerian colleagues.

But UK scholars can also become more mobile in other ways. Often in response to the issues discussed above, many of us have already increased our involvement in workshops and conferences on the African continent. The growing number of excellent events on the continent suggests that these are able to attract large and highly diverse audiences of African scholars.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, co-organising workshops and conferences with African colleagues and mentors is an excellent way for us as individuals to learn from them.

## *Conclusion*

African Studies cannot exist in any part of the world without the active presence and leadership of African scholars and institutions. In order to keep Africa at the heart of our research, scholars based outside of Africa must engage with the historical and ongoing inequalities that shape our engagement with the continent. While many of the challenges we face extend far beyond our scholarly community and are thus outside our direct control, we can make a difference, collectively and as individuals. An active and ethical scholarly life in our discipline includes the engagement with the inequalities that shape our interpersonal relationships and research networks. While many of the constraints we face are beyond our immediate control, we can decide how to engage with theoretical and epistemological questions, we can commit to spending time on the African continent to research and exchange ideas with intellectuals and scholars, we can adopt and support pro-African editorial policies, and we can act individually and collectively to emphasise the importance of mutual respect.

While Africa-centred research practices have a clear ethical dimension, they are also essential to the ability to develop grounded theories and to take intellectual risks. The study of African social and historical dynamics often offers insights that challenge established disciplinary boundaries, and thus drives innovation and the emergence of new fields of knowledge (Bates, Mudimbe and O’Barr 1993). Moreover, an increased focus on the African continent encourages debates about the epistemologies that motivate the production of different types of canonical knowledge. In this way, the study of Africa is central to the production of insights and approaches that transcend the normative dominance of European concepts (Mignolo 2009). Needless to say, the production of more plural forms of knowledge is important for scholarship beyond Africa.

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to subject- and area-specific networks, please allow me also to suggest the conferences of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA). Founded in 2013, the ASAA is currently led by the formidable Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Professor of African and Gender Studies at the University of Ghana, and offers a supportive atmosphere, interdisciplinarity, and chance to catch up with colleagues associated with African Studies around the world.

Equally importantly, we know that African debates and events matters beyond primarily academic concerns: debates emanating from the continent, such as #RhodesMustFall – incidentally also the topic of the 2018 winner of the Fage and Oliver Prize of the African Studies Association of the UK (Nyamnjoh 2016) – have revived discussions about how to address the domination of European and North American voices not only in the academy, but in public life more generally. The importance of such debates is further confirmed by the continent’s growing demographic importance as the century progresses. By supporting and engaging with such debates, scholars of Africa have a unique opportunity not only to shape public discourse but to do so with a view to a meaningful future.

And finally, many of the issues raised here are not limited to the study of Africa. Debates about the conditions of knowledge production and the possibility of respectful exchange are important for research on all parts of the world where academics labour under greater constraints than in most European or North American settings, and/ or for all societies where the concepts that shape social and intellectual practices are significantly different from those established in ostensibly international academic discourse. Diversity and difference are central to the human experience, and insofar as our research contributes to our understanding of human lives, we need to engage with epistemologies, methods, and voices from a wide range of backgrounds. Only a critical engagement with multiple ways of knowing can contribute to academic practices and debates that are truly representative of humanity.

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