

REPORTS

“AFRICA ON THE MOVE: SHIFTING IDENTITIES, HISTORIES, BOUNDARIES”

**10TH International conference on African studies
“Viva Africa” Hradec Králové, 10–11 November
2017**

Petr Skalník

This international conference, organised by the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové in partnership with the Metropolitan University Prague and under the auspices of the Czech Association for African Studies, took place this time in Hradec Králové where the hosts were Africanists attached to the University of Hradec Králové. The conference that since 2013 changed from annual to biennial has become a fixture in the calendar of Africanist events in Europe and beyond. Colleagues who come regularly meet enthusiasts of African studies working in Central Europe as well as young adepts from Africa and Europe. This time the theme, „Africa on the Move: Shifting Identities, Histories, Boundaries,“ attracted seasoned and younger participants. The opening ceremony was solemn, the vice-rector Dr. Karel Kouba reminded the listeners about the ever stronger tradition of research on Africa in Central European institutes of higher education. He stressed the attention that the Philosophical Faculty at the University of Hradec Králové pays to the development of African Studies that besides the „Viva Africa“ conferences also includes the international journal *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*.

Petr Skalník, editor of *Modern Africa*, chaired the opening ceremony and invited the first keynote speaker, Francis Nyamnjoh, professor of social anthropology at the University of Cape Town, to deliver his address. The title of his speech was „How to Think, Research and Write Africa: Insights from Amos Tutuola.“ Nyamnjoh, one of the most active scholars who strives for a new approach in African studies that is liberated from hierarchical procedures typical for the era of

colonialism, used the writings of the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, famous for his imaginary story *Palm Wine Drinkard*, published 65 years ago by Faber and Faber in London, to show that the present shift in African studies should get inspiration from this novel. Why now to dig out Tutuola? The answer Nyamnjoh gave is complex. Tutuola's writings symbolise the mobility, anxiety and incompleteness of the world in which we share our living. At the same time Tutuola projects the possibility of completeness. Nyamnjoh showed he was a master of writing himself, a true follower of Tutuola, and the audience felt his mastery of thought and words quite literally.

The second keynote speaker was Pavel Mikeš, an accomplished Africanist and at the moment also ambassador of the Czech Republic to Nigeria. His topic was „External Migration in West Africa.“ The speaker described how migrants prepare themselves for the long journey and what could discourage them from the dangers of suffering. The question of migration is very complex and Dr Mikeš tried hard to convey the complexities. As is well known, the Czech Republic has pursued anti-migration policies and therefore the task of the speaker was the more challenging.

The morning programme was enriched by a book launch of a recently published book in Czech and partly also English, titled *African Studies in the Czech Lands and Slovakia since 1960: A Critical Hindsight*. The contributors present among the delegates received their authors' copies.

The first panel was general, as it dealt with mobility and migration discourses and practices. Birgit Englert lectured about African mobility studies and applied her thoughts to Tanzania and African migrants in France. Stephanie Rudwick spoke about English as the lingua franca of Africa, opening the world to Africans. Kateřina Mildnerová and Pavel Miškařík reported about their research on the identities of Czech living in Namibia. Finally, Sarah Lunaček, a Slovene specialist on African nomadism, brought in the sedentarisation of Niger Tuaregs as a problem in the ambiguity of nomadism.

The next panel opened with the paper by Vladimír Klíma, one of the founding fathers of Czech African Studies. His paper about Ashanti magic was based on his ambassadorial experience in Ghana. Victor

Marsai gave a captivating account on the nomadism of Al Shabaab, a terrorist group in Somalia. The panel was enriched by the paper of Noemi Steuer, who examined mobility narratives of protesting Malian students. The final paper in this panel was by Vilém Řehák who discussed the problem of strategic infrastructure projects in Africa, including the fast rail lines built by the Chinese.

The third panel was devoted to the cultural aspects of mobility and migration. Daniel Künzler, a Swiss sociologist working on Africa, analysed videos from East Africa. Dobrota Pucherová, a Slovak literary scholar attached both to the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the University of Vienna, concentrated on contemporary women's writing on migration. Vojtěch Šarše presented a paper on migrants in the anticolonial novels by Francophone authors.

A fourth panel was chaired by Francis Nyamnjoh, who introduced the speakers. Maciej Kurcz, a leading Polish Africanist, revealed the complexities of the northern Sudanese practices of travel and river crossing. Florens Eckert brought to attention of listeners the colonial migration from German Togo to Cameroon and Fernando Poo. Veneranda Klegr showed in her paper by what factors migration from Tanzania to the Czech Republic is determined and what is its sociocultural impact. Jarmila Brezinova Švihranová paid attention to the Indian immigration to South Africa after the Boer wars. She mentioned Gandhi and his role in the struggle against the repercussions of the 1907 Asiatic Registration Act. Silvester Trnovec of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Slovak Academy of Sciences dealt with the phenomenon of African children seeking education in Dakar (especially the famous Ecole William Ponty) in the first 45 years of the 20th century. Finally, Petr Skalník read his review of *Letters of Stone*, a book by Steven Robins, about his relatives' attempts to break out of the Hitlerite cage in which Jews were deprived of citizenship only to realise that South Africa was not prepared to receive them as refugees. Robins' grandparents, aunt and uncle had to die in Nazi hecatombs. The speaker pointed out that the destinies of refugees in today's Africa and Asia (Rohingya) seem to repeat the story described so vividly in Robins's book .

The conference confirmed the vitality of African studies in post-communist Europe and its strengthening links with African studies

worldwide. Revised versions of the papers will be published. The next “Viva Africa” conference will take place in the Palacký University at Olomouc in 2019.