

# Why African Studies Matters

*By associate professor, PhD Amanda Hammar*



## Introduction

One of my tasks as the former director (2014-2020) of the Centre of African Studies (CAS) would be to welcome our new Masters students each year. In my short speech, I would try to convey to them why and how African Studies matters on multiple levels in the contemporary world we all share. At the core of such a message are questions about where, how and by whom knowledge about Africa and Africans on the continent and in relation to the world are produced, validated, circulated, published, debated, and what implications this has. This set of concerns and the inquiries they provoke are far from neutral. At stake are deeply entrenched power relations on a multitude of levels and their material and symbolic effects, as well as the possibilities for either confronting or reinforcing such dynamics of inequality and exclusion. Long histories of global and local structural violence and epistemic erasure affecting the African continent means that there is much knowledge that needs revealing, recovering, or challenging. At the same time, the continent is made up of its own powerfully self-defining

centres, speaking their own truths, not dependent on the gaze and interpretation of external observers and commentators for validation. These are just some of the core challenges that African Studies scholars are obliged to consider.

In addition to the above, during the two years of their MA studies at CAS, our students are taught how to practice *doing* African Studies – as opposed to merely studying ‘something in Africa’. At the heart of this practice are interdisciplinary and relational approaches that ensure attention to all relevant and interconnected dimensions of complex African realities. The aim, in general, is to ensure a layered and critical understanding beyond simplifications and single stories; and to counter both conscious and unintentional erasures that sustain strategic unknowing of African worlds. Debates over what African Studies means and what it does have entailed diverse perspectives and ongoing shifts in the politics of knowledge over time and across geographies. What I hope to do briefly in this essay is to reflect on some of these broad shifts, before laying out my own arguments for why African Studies matters.

## Unfolding African Studies

African Studies, in contemporary times, aims to generate but also question knowledge about the full spectrum of diverse African conditions and realities, past and present, both within and beyond the continent. While defined by being interdisciplinary, this does not mean that there are no distinct – and contested – positions and perspectives within it, as well as tensions around such issues as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and more. An additional part of dynamic landscape is the critical engagement by African Studies communities with the highly uneven conditions of knowledge production on and in Africa. Confronting historical and ongoing structural distortions in resources and representation that constrain present-day possibilities for African scholars and institutions to flourish on the continent, is a necessary dimension of African Studies.

However, such critical perspectives and politically challenging agendas have not always been the norm. Indeed, the origin stories of African Studies in many parts of the global north have been closely intertwined with British and European colonialism. Other kinds of global projects (such as neoimperialism and neoliberalism) have also affected the form and extent to which support has been provided for (or withdrawn from) Africa-oriented research and institutions in the global north, as well as in Africa itself. Well-known among these was US funding for area studies, including African Studies, during the Cold War era, as a source of intelligence for the CIA. In a somewhat different yet not entirely unrelated vein, funding for research on Africa (if not for

African Studies itself) has been linked to development assistance as well as other strategic geopolitical and economic interests, for many decades. To some extent, this has positively helped to expand research on Africa in Europe, with substantial concentrations of researchers working on Africa spread out in different universities and some independent research and policy institutions.

Yet the combination of northern-driven developmentalist and strategic concerns has influenced research-financing streams that in turn shape certain pathways of knowledge production both on and in Africa. In recent years, research agendas and key research funding mechanisms both in the European Union and in individual countries like Denmark, have (over)emphasised such areas as governance, security, migration and climate change, and increasingly China in Africa and Islam in Africa. Denmark has further narrowed possibilities for government-funded ‘development research’ in Africa to its own shrinking number of development partner countries on the continent. This further reduces the space for a much broader understanding of Africa and pursuit of questions emanating from the continent itself.

To return to the unfolding of African Studies, various constituencies of African Studies scholars or scholars of Africa have taken specific institutional, intellectual and political forms at different historical conjunctures. Within the Anglophone world, in the United States for example, some of the earliest attention to Africa and African Studies as a defined field of scholarship began over a century ago at the initiative of African-American

scholars, writers, teachers, activists and Pan Africanists such as W. E. B. Du Bois and William Leo Hansberry. Much of this history got hidden beneath the hegemony of the mostly white and male dominated African Studies Association of the USA that was established in the late 1950s. Importantly, the racialized composition of the ASA membership and leadership was challenged by African Americans and US-based black Africans in the late 1960s, although little radical change occurred at that time. Subsequent changes in terms of both race and gender representation within the ASA occurred more gradually as the academic landscape of American universities and African Studies programmes diversified to some extent (Allman 2019). However, structural inequalities have persisted within the US academy, as well as in Britain and elsewhere in Europe (Nolte 2019), and between African and non-African academic conditions (Mkandawire 1997).

Crucial challenges to the fundamental coloniality of northern-based knowledge production on Africa have come from within the African continent at different times. This has included radical nationalist or Pan-Africanist scholars in African universities in the 1960s and 70s, Africa-wide research networks such as CODESRIA, from the continent's surprisingly few African Studies centres, and from the African Studies Association of Africa recently formed in 2013. The most recent and most radical challenges have come from a younger generation of African scholars and activists at the forefront of decolonization movements such the South African-initiated #RhodesMustFall, backed by a diver-

sity of critical senior African and Africanist scholars. This has overlapped with the global scale of #BlackLivesMatter, which has added further impetus to ongoing African Studies questions about the racialized structures and practices of knowledge production about Africa and Africans (Adebanwi 2016, Pailey 2016, Musila 2017).

## **Studying Africa and African Studies in Europe**

There are, of course, complex and troubling histories binding individual European states and specific parts of the African continent and its peoples. This is most notable for those with specific colonial (as well as missionizing) pasts on the continent such as Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal, and to a lesser extent Germany, Italy and Spain. Long after most African states gained their independence (the majority in the 1960s), their postcolonial trajectories have continued to be marked by various economic, political, social, cultural, religious and other linkages. These relationships, in turn, have shaped European states' own social landscapes, not least through different flows of migrants and displacees from former colonies and elsewhere in Africa arriving at key historical moments over the past century, establishing significant African diasporas across Europe.

In European countries without colonial pasts in Africa – such as the Nordics – other kinds of incentives have prompted support for research on and in Africa at different times. For example, solidarity with African liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s was significant. One outcome was the establishment in

Uppsala, Sweden, in the early 60s, of the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies (SIAS), forerunner to the present-day Nordic Africa Institute (NAI). However, following African independence and the shift of international support mostly into development aid, much of the interest in Africa became linked increasingly to development itself, with consequences also for research funding as previously noted. In the Nordic countries, development research institutes with a policy dimension emerged in the 1980s and 90s mainly outside universities, many of which had a strong focus on Africa given active development engagement on the continent. Examples include Norway's Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Bergen, and the Centre for Development Research (CDR) in Copenhagen, later becoming part of the present-day Danish Institute for Development Studies (DIIS). Within universities, development studies departments surfaced (now reframed in terms of global studies) within which research and teaching using African cases was/is fairly common. But most Africa-related research has otherwise been concentrated in departments of anthropology, geography, history, economics, agriculture, public health and medicine, and less so in literature, linguistics or law. Notably, across the Nordic region, only one place has had a mandate solely as a research and teaching centre of *African Studies*, namely the Centre of African Studies (CAS) at the University of Copenhagen.

### **Why African Studies matters**

Knowledge about 'Africa' is in no short supply. But the core question must necessarily be asked: whose knowledge, and

what kind of knowledge (or knowledges) about Africa counts, where, and why, and with what effects? Knowledge is never neutral or outside power, and is always situated and consequential. There have been centuries' worth of books and images about Africa and Africans generated by non-Africans in different contexts, many of them reproducing problematic stereotypes that, among other things, were used to legitimise colonialism. At the same time, even longer histories of oral and written, artistic and musical forms of knowledge have been produced in Africa, by Africans, that are little known outside the continent. Engaging with both bodies of knowledge as they continue to unfold – including their articulations and contestations with each other – is an important foundation for answering such a question.

African Studies has a central role to play in placing the question of knowledge production and validation on the agenda not only of those studying Africa, but also of those who don't. As Sullivan and Tuana (2007) have pointed out, ignorance is not a passive state. "It has to be manufactured, and sustained. It is the product of many acts and many negligences" (2007: 2). African Studies is well-placed to interrupt such negligence and to counter dangerous forms of both unknowing and 'knowing' in relation to African realities. At the same time, alongside other postcolonial and decolonialist critics calling for 'theorising from the south' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), key African and Africanist scholars have posed important challenges to the hegemony of northern theory that assumes universality especially from the

particular experiences of Europe. African Studies provides an important foundation for highlighting some of the most compelling theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of human societies based on research on and from Africa. This often remains invisible or ignored *because* it has emerged out of studies in *African* contexts.

Finally, in line with the above, it is also important to emphasise why *teaching* African Studies matters. The majority of students of African Studies are motivated to work in either government agen-

cies or non-governmental organisations or even in the private sector where they hope to contribute meaningfully to positive transformations of African realities, based as far as possible on African terms. For those in such positions, an education in critical African Studies prepares them well for engaging with the complexities and contradictions such work entails, and provides solid ground for a necessary challenge to ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ about Africa and hence about the world.

## **Elementary Christology**

**Gæsteforelæsning ved Professor, Dr. Heinrich Assel**

Tid: Fredag den 21. maj 2021 kl. 13.15-15.00

Sted: Oplyses senere

Arr.: Afdeling for Systematisk Teologi

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