



POINT SUD

Centre de Recherche sur le Savoir Local

Programme Point Sud 2012-2013

“Africa N’Ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial Library”

Dakar (Senegal) – 28th/31st of January 2013

Report

1 Organisers

The Africa N'ko Conference was hosted by Point Sud and CODESRIA in Dakar, Senegal at the beginning of 2013, with generous support from DFG. It was organized by a scientific committee consisting initially of:

Prof. Achille Mbembe (History), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Prof. Mamadou Diouf (African Studies), Columbia University, New York

Prof. Mamadou Diawara (Anthropology), Goethe University Frankfurt

Prof. Ebrima Sall (Sociology), CODESRIA, Dakar

Prof. Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga (Sociology), University de Lille1

and later including:

Prof. Frieda Ekoto (Comparative Literature), University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Dr. Kelly Gillespie (Anthropology), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Dr. Rawya Tawfik Amer (Political Science), Cairo University

2 Themes and Objectives

The event was conceptualized as a revisitation of the question of the 'colonial library' in Africa, a term made famous by V.Y. Mudimbe in his 1998 treatise *The Invention of Africa*, but consolidating a long tradition of anti-colonial critique that sought to decenter colonialist accounts of Africa and other parts of the colonized world. Developed in the wake of imperialist expansion, the social sciences represent one of the modalities of the tumultuous relationships which link the West to the rest of the world. The conquerors' concern with comparison and establishing a hierarchy led European observers to construct the identity of Others based on the European model of civilization, and, as a result, to relegate them to an inferior stage in human history. The study of knowledge of African societies represents a paradigmatic case of this episteme, centered on the colonial library. Certain Africans were very active colonial assistants in this intellectual domain as well. This library – made up of the practices and writings of missionaries, explorers, philosophers, ethnologists, etc. – still exerts a strong influence on systems of contemporary research, in two principle ways: this colonial library overshadows the existence of other libraries, ways of thinking, and methods; and certain groups of Western specialists boast of the colonial library in order to achieve – whether in an overt or subtle way – a monopoly on this knowledge. As for African researchers, they are ordered to take on the role of informants, given their constant proximity to local populations, which renders their every critical and theoretical comment illegitimate.

These statements justify a radical questioning of the epistemological validity of claims to dominant knowledge concerning African societies and, above all, allow for a more in-depth examination of a crucial question: How to think favorably about African societies, starting with an approach which is critical of tools that are strongly marked by Western history? Or how to critique African societies not on terms that emerge out of colonial paradigms, but on terms that are appropriate to an African world?

The sessions of the Afrika N'ko project were designed in such a way as to open up these questions, and place the problem of knowledge of and for Africa in our contemporary world under review. The sessions in Dakar focused on the analysis of conditions to overcome historical constraints related to the creation of the space of African intellectual authority. The sessions were constructed so as to reconsider the problem of rereading the colonial library, look at the worth and practices of other libraries, and open up questions of how to move beyond the forms of exclusion that the colonial library seems to imply.

3 Methodology and Results

The Africa N'ko conference was organized over four full days and twenty-one sessions, including a key-note address by V.Y. Mudimbe, roundtables and panels (see conference programme for further details). There was also an important meeting with doctoral students at the University Cheikh Anta Diop on the fifth day of the workshop. Aside from those living in Dakar, all participants stayed at the Novotel Hotel where the conference was based, creating a rich time of conversations and encounters both inside and outside of the formal programme. A huge amount of intellectual ground was covered over the course of the four days, and a vast amount of important conversation and networking amongst African scholars was accomplished, all extremely significant for the intellectual culture of the continent.

Two defining events served as context for the meeting. The first was the coinciding of the conference with the 40th anniversary of CODESRIA. This anniversary gave the conference an auspicious sensibility. The theme of the conference intersected in important ways with the political and epistemological grounds for launching CODESRIA four decades ago: the importance of producing knowledge from and for the African continent. The second event was less celebratory: the reported burning of the Timbuktu manuscripts by Islamic fundamentalist forces in Mali. During the conference, participants collectively crafted a public statement on the importance of preserving and respecting the African archive, and condemned the burnings as antithetical to the spirit of our theme and our scholarly gathering. Both events granted the conference a sense of the weight of our collective effort in working through the problem of African knowledge.

This report will not address every paper and panel and its contribution to the theme as there were so many presentations that it will be too many to do justice to any of them. Rather, it will attempt to generalize the overall discoveries and the biggest propositions that marked the conference proceedings. Broadly, then, the four days of sessions considered different iterations of and responses to the African 'colonial library' and the question of how knowledge of and about Africa is forged. There was a deep ambivalence throughout the conversation about whether to use the colonial library to write about Africa as injured /dispossessed/misrepresented or to use the library to write Africa's potential /possessions /modes of self-representation. Throughout the conversation participants leaned heavily on the latter, seeing our historical moment as a time to read ourselves out of and into the library in extraordinary ways, refashioning the library so that we are able to draw on it as a resource, reroute its old hierarchies into forms of writing, style and self-knowledge that pose African history as a resource for the future.

In this light, we heard during the conference: 'who cares about the colonial library?!' 'We are beyond the library!' 'We own the library!' We were always in it, it was always co-engendered, so let us own it, see it as ours. Crucial to this mode of reclamation, this deliberate disorientation of older archival tropes, was the claim that the African can and must be read as worldly, as always having been worldly, and as needing to lay claim to this worldly relation, beyond the usual exceptionalism that accompanies discussions of Africa. Hence the claims that emerged: We are also, even if in/of Africa, in the world. We are Creoles! Even as we take the signs of Africa seriously, we must not be trapped by Africanness, we cannot be parochial, our place is in the world. Thus the archive becomes no longer a trap for a hierarchized relation between Africa and the West/North, but rather as a place for renewed thinking about African in the World. One presenter, for example, used African-American feminisms to reflect on France in service of a re-reading of Africa. Another petitioned us to experiment with a plurality of knowledge's that appear in places we don't expect them, beyond the West/North and beyond the university.

The broad claim being made was that we must proceed, despite an ongoing condition of African structural marginalization, as if the world is ours, as if we have the right to appropriate the library. This AS IF is very important. It changes the terms of classical critique. If we are to wait until Africa is on equal footing politically and economically to the rest of the world to be able to speak, for the perfect material conditions for thought, we will simply rehearse the prose of inequality, of harm, of victimization over and over again. We will get stuck. This is where the four days took issue with Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot, given the conditions of language, or knowledge, speak. It seemed that the conference participants were trying to experiment with the idea that Africa must practice new modes of articulating the position: 'let us speak in spite of our history'.

The most provocative suggestion about how to go about this audacious work of being African-in-the-world was to take our lead from artists. We heard much about African artists who are using the library for their own purposes, as a terrain upon which new imaginations of African forms can take flight. One interesting set of propositions was to develop a powerful imagination about how to move from what was in one session called the 'African fragment' - the word, the plant, the scene, the movement - as a small instance of the library that could form an important beginning point for finding new ways of writing the continent.

There are difficulties with finding a good contemporary question about the colonial library in Africa. Mudimbe posed the specific concept over 20 years ago, and during the conference we heard many much older histories of this epistemological critique. Indeed, there was an incantation of names over the course of the conference: Senghor, Césaire, Glissant, Fanon, Du Bois, Pixley Ka Seme.... Many people of great integrity and mind have turned this idea around and around. The questions for the conference participants became, 'What do we pose as our question to it, here, now? What do the generations in this room make of the idea?' The very rich set of ideas that were thrown up for review at the conference did not yet constitute a thorough question. They were posed more as a methodological mode of proceeding. Method

is extremely important, but what is needed next is continued consideration about how to evolve a powerful question, or set of questions, that could animate future work on the question of African epistemology and the problem of the archive. For this, the conversation must be ongoing, and the meeting in Dakar was a momentous first step in that process.

4 Sustainability of the Event

The sheer number of African scholars, Africanists and scholars of alternative epistemologies that converged in Dakar for the conference created an extremely important context for networking and the kind of cross-fertilization of projects that is desperately needed on and for the continent. New and old colleagues were able to spend four days in deep conversation and exchange and if just for this the conference was very significant.

The scientific committee has also, however, requested the submission of papers for a collection of articles on the theme to be published by CODESRIA. This work towards publication is in ongoing.

The committee also took a decision at the end of the conference that funds need to be raised for a series of events on the theme to be convened over the next several years in different centres on the continent. The committee is still in dialogue about these plans, and any suggestions on sources of funding for this endeavor will be greatly appreciated.

5 Participants

1. Dr. Salim Abdelmajid, Philosophy, ENS, Paris, France
2. Dr. Hassana Abdou, Université de Ngaoundéré, Cameroun
3. Akwasi Aidoo, Trust Africa, Dakar, Senegal
4. Samir Amin, Director of Forum du Tiers-Monde, Dakar, Senegal
5. Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, African Filmmakers' and Producers Guild, France
6. Prof. Boubacar Barry, History, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
7. Hamady Bocoum, Director IFAN-Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
8. Prof. Gado Boureima Alpha, History, Université de Niamey, Niger
9. Dr. Ifi Amadiume, Anthropology, Dartmouth College, USA
10. Dr. Rawya M. Tawfik Amer, Political Science, University of Cairo, Egypt
11. Prof. Rémy Bazenguissa, Sociology, EHESS, Paris, France
12. Marie Ndiaye, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
13. Prof. Adrien Ndiouga Benga, History, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
14. Prof. Justin K. Bisanswa, French Literature, Université Laval, Canada
15. Amouro Camille, Writer, Cotonou, Benin
16. Christian Clages, German Ambassador in Senegal
17. Abdul Tejan Cole, OSIWA, Dakar, Senegal
18. Prof. Ramatoulaye Diagne, Philosophy, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
19. Prof. Mamoussé Diagne, Philosophy, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
20. Aminata Diaw, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
21. Prof. Mamadou Diawara, Anthropology, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Germany
22. Prof. Manthia Diawara, Comparative Literature, New York University, USA
23. Prof. Mamadou Diouf, African Studies, Columbia University, New York, USA
24. Antonin Benoit Diouf, IDEP, Dakar
25. Mansour Sy Djamil, Deputy of the National Assembly, Dakar, Senegal
26. Prof. Elsa Dorlin, Philosophy, Université Paris 8, France
27. Prof. Laurent Dubois, Romance Studies and History, Duke University, USA

28. Prof. Frieda Ekotto, Afro-American and African Studies, University of Michigan, USA
29. Yves Eric Elouga, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
30. Prof. Augustin Emame, Law, Université Nantes, France
31. Dr. Gonçalves Euclides, Anthropology, Université Mondlane, Mozambique
32. Prof. Babacar Fall, History, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Dakar, Senegal
33. Dr. Abdou Salam Fall, Sociology, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
34. Dr. Nkolo Foé, Philosophy, Université de Yaoundé 1, Cameroun
35. Dr. Kelly Gillespie, Anthropology, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
36. Prof. Anata Giri, Sociology, Madras Institute for Development Studies, India
37. Prof. Kaiama Glover, Francophone Literature and Postcolonial Studies, Columbia University, New York, USA
38. Prof. Jane Gordon, Political Science, Temple University, USA
39. Prof. Salah M. Hassan, History of Art, Cornell University, USA
40. Dr. Bouchra Sidi Hida, Social Sciences, CERSS, Marrakech, Morocco
41. Prof. Rada Ivekovic, Philosophy, Université Jean Monnet - St. Etienne, France
42. Michael Jeismann, Director of Goethe Institute, Dakar, Senegal
43. Prof. Donna Jones, English Language and Literature, University of California-Berkeley, USA
44. Dr. Henry Kam Kah, History, Université de Buea, Cameroun
45. Prof. Onoma Ato Kwanema, Political Science, Institute of Security Studies, Ethiopia
46. Prof. Bernard Mumpasi Lututala, Demography, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
47. Prof. Elisio Macamo, Sociology, University of Basle, Switzerland
48. Prof. Penda Mbow, History, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
49. Prof. Achille Mbembe, History, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
50. Prof. Gertrude Mianda, Women's Studies, York University, Canada
51. Prof. Valentin Mudimbé, Literature, Duke University, USA
52. Dr. Christoph Muehlberg, DFG, Bonn, Germany
53. Dr. Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, Anthropology, Oxford University, UK
54. Mary Teuw Niane, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Dakar, Senegal
55. Dr. Edoja Okpokunu, Anthropology, University of Benin, Nigeria
56. Dr. Anne Piriou, RIAE, Paris, France
57. Florence Plockey, PhD-candidate in Development Studies, Tamale University, Ghana
58. Olivier Sagna, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Dakar, Senegal
59. Prof. Ebrima Sall, Sociology, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
60. Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Sociology, Université de Coimbra, Portugal
61. Ibrahima Sar, Director Bureau Africable Senegal, Dakar, Senegal
62. Prof. Mamadou F. Sarr, Economy, Université Gaston Berger Saint-Louis, Senegal
63. Bruno Sonko, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Dakar, Senegal
64. Prof. Ibrahima Sow, IFAN-Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
65. Prof. Fatou Sow, Gender Studies, IFAN-Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
66. Dr. Emmanuelle Tall, Anthropology, IRD, Paris, France
67. Maréma Touré Thiam, UNESCO, Breda, Dakar, Senegal
68. Prof. Ibrahima Thioub, History, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
69. Dr. Leon Tsambu, Sociology, Université de Kinshasa, Congo
70. Prof. Françoise Vergès, Political Science, Goldsmiths University London, UK
71. Prof. Zubairu Wai, Political Science, Lakehead University, Thunderbay, Canada
72. Abdarahmane Wone, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal
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