

## **Workshop Program Point Sud 2021**

### **Situating the African Genome**

**28<sup>th</sup> Feb – 4<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**Stellenbosch Institute for Advance Study, South Africa**

#### **Conveners**

Dr. Henri Michel Yéré, Institute of Sociology, Centre for African Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland

Dr. Mavis Machirori, Senior Researcher (Justice and Equalities), Ada Lovelace Institute, London, United Kingdom

Dr. Lauren Paremoer, Department of Political Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Prof. Dr. Katharina Schramm, Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Bayreuth, Germany

#### **Abstract**

In the three decades since the inception of the Human Genome Project, our understanding of health and disease has shifted considerably, moving from pathogens to molecular to genetic understanding of predispositions to disease. The analysis of the gene and the genome has heralded the dawn of the era of discovery and precision medicine, which has subsequently resulted in attempts to stratify and delineate communities of those who are susceptible to different disease. Focusing on genetic predispositions has expanded the scientific gaze of knowledge, not just from disease but to biosocial identities as well. In so doing, it became increasingly clear that the current knowledge provides information that pertains mainly to Western and Northern European geographies. This led to new areas of inquiry, focusing on what is often referred to as the ‘African genome’.

Such a designation of the genome to a social category of human classification raises several questions about how the notion of identity is being conceptualized, particularly how ethnicity becomes an identifier to human disease and is subsequently seen as a pathway to precision and predictive medicine. This notion of ethnicity is problematic as it appears to map onto already contested notions of race and so its role in the understanding of genomics remains unclear. The current use of ethnic identity in genomics maps the genome to cultural practices and environmental ecosystems – a practice which shifts the ways in which knowledge of the body is theorised. The current theorization, which sees Western/Northern European modes of knowledge as dominant within genomics, relegates African epistemologies to the margins. As such, whether thinking about the ‘African genome’ can exclude Western notions of the body, remains to be seen, especially given that these very notions also influence ethical ideas of consent and autonomy, which may translate differently in African nations. Yet, such binaries need to be interrogated as definitions of identity, ethnicity, of the body lead to different ‘values’ being placed on the genome.

An interdisciplinary engagement is necessary to begin to understand how issues of identity and ethnicity play out in genomics research, and can better situate colonial history in how the ‘African genome’ is defined and used. We are particularly interested in the mutual influence of popular and scientific knowledges on the ways in we think about ethnicity within Africa and in genomics.

The planned Point Sud workshop which will involve established and early-career scholars from various fields, will focus on how the aforementioned concepts have gained traction in science, and will situate the African genome in relation to disciplines such as public health, the history of medicine, pharmacogenomics, but also anthropology, sociology, politics and history.