



## Program Point Sud 2017

# Africa N’Ko – Speaking of Africa in the World and Redefining the Social Sciences and the Humanities: Words and Validation of Knowledge

22th-26th October 2017, Point Sud, Bamako

## Report



## 1 Organisers

Prof. Mamadou Diawara, Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt

Prof. Elísio Salvado Macamo, Sociology, University of Basel

Dr. Moussa Sissoko, Geography, Point Sud Bamako

## 2 Themes and Objectives

The conference took place from the 22<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> October 2017 at Point Sud in Bamako. It is part of the research project *Africa N'Ko, Africa in the World*, a long-term project aiming to create a synergy from among the plurality of reflections on the production of knowledge in human sciences both in and on Africa.

Conferences on a range of themes are regularly organised within this research project. Following the Dakar conferences in 2013 and 2015 in the framework of the Program Point Sud, where debates focussed on colonial libraries and the theme of translation, this third conference dealt with the challenge of redefining the social sciences and the humanities from the perspective of African scholarship. Its purpose was to address the methodological challenges arising from the nature of the social sciences and humanities as discursive scholarly enterprises from the perspective of African scholarship.

The main issue which the conference addressed concerned the extent to which concepts can be relied upon to mediate researchers' efforts at rendering the world intelligible. The point of departure was the twin realization that concepts are our main tool in the work of inquiry that we engage in, but also that as far as the study of Africa is concerned scholars have been confronted with the challenge of applying concepts developed in very specific historical, political, economic and cultural contexts to realities further afield both temporally as well as physically. This is not an argument against the legitimate universalistic claims of science. Rather, it is an exercise in methodological caution that seeks to draw attention to general scholarly problems drawing from their particular manifestation in a very specific field, namely Africa.

The social sciences, history and the humanities are essentially discursive scholarly enterprises. The disciplines that make up these scholarly fields make use of words to grasp reality. From an abstract perspective knowledge production takes place at the moment when words become concepts, i.e. when they lose their everyday discursive meaning to become research tools, i.e. analytical. The bridge that holds the scholarly activity of producing knowledge rests on the extremely fragile assumption that words turned concepts can help researchers represent reality in reliable ways. Debates about the validity of research findings are often, in this sense, debates about the purported link between concepts and reality. In fact, this link has provided the rationale for the trust that generations of methodologists have placed on the idea that the reliability of a concept depends on the extent to which it is based on clear and solid rules of correspondence. More radical formulations of this belief have found expression in the now highly problematic notion of "operationalism". The relationship between words (concepts) and the validity of knowledge is a particularly thorny one in the context of African studies. It bears on the crucial question of how words and concepts that have emerged under specific

historical circumstances to account for very specific political, economic and social phenomena and issues can be relied upon to accomplish the same task when applied to different realities in different times under conditions of unequal enunciation. For this reason, it seemed extremely timely, to bring together scholars who reflected upon the challenges which the relationship between words (concepts) and the validity of knowledge poses to the production of knowledge on Africa. More specifically, the gathering addressed issues concerning (a) the assumptions underlying the role which concepts play in the representation of reality, (b) the extent to which concepts are bound to their own conditions of possibility – which are historical, political and social – and (c) and the ways in which the semantic fields covered by them can underdetermine reality in very important ways.

The conference focused on a set of issues that challenge scholars to engage critically with the manner in which they deploy concepts to retrieve reality. The study of Africa offers an ideal ground for a critical engagement with these quintessential methodological issues. Debates over concepts have been part and parcel of African Studies. Concepts like “tribe”, “primitive society” (anthropology), “tradition” and “modernity” (sociology), “law”, “custom” (Legal studies), “stability”, “change” (history) have often been at the centre of acrimonious debates. More often than not, these debates have raised accusations of racism, ethnocentrism and misrepresentation which have not necessarily contributed towards scholarly debates that could have helped the disciplines overcome their shortcomings. While much discomfort felt by scholars and researchers of African affairs towards the manner in which Africa has been studied has translated either into a rejection of the terms of the study or an outright commitment to epistemological positions very close to relativism, the conference fostered a fruitful critical engagement with this scholarly tradition and tried to accomplish two very important tasks. The first task consisted in identifying the general methodological challenges that are posed by approaches to Africa. In other words, the task enjoins us to resist the temptation to see the shortcomings of knowledge about Africa as part of a scholarly conspiracy to misrepresent the continent and its people. Rather, these shortcomings should be seen as manifestations of general methodological problems faced by the social sciences and humanities. The second task entailed a plea that the validity of knowledge about Africa should be judged by its potential in helping the disciplines refine their theoretical and conceptual tools. By pondering the challenges posed by concepts the aim of the conference was to contribute towards enhancing the importance of African Studies not only as a legitimate field of study, but also as one that yields questions and answers that are of extreme relevance to the pursuit of knowledge beyond the continent and across disciplinary boundaries.

### **3 Methodology and Results**

About 50 persons took part in the conference. They came from different countries such as: Congo, Mali, Canada, Germany, Palestine, Burkina Faso, Kenya, France, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Norway, USA, Belgium, Cameroun, Brazil and The Netherlands. 35 of them were actively involved as keynote speakers, round table presenters as well as paper presenters. Committed to the idea of production of knowledge in human sciences in and on Africa, they provided theoretical inputs and insights into field outcomes to enrich the reflection on *Africa N'Ko, Africa in the World*.

Presentations and discussions took place in English or French, depending on the individual choice. Almost all participants were able to understand both English and French to an extent that enabled them to follow. Some participants did not understand both languages, and bilingual colleagues summarized the presentations and discussions in the other language. Some presentations were accompanied by power point slides in the other language.

The conference was ceremonially opened with a welcoming address by Moussa Sissoko, Co-Director of Point Sud. Then, a keynote entitled “Retrieving Reality through ‘alien’ concepts” by Elísio Macamo gave the starting signal for contributions on the conference topic. He urged participants to take sciences seriously, noting that concepts and contexts tend to be hostile to scholars. Concepts have emerged within specific contexts that render their relationship with reality inaccurate. Words such as “tradition”, “black” and “primitiveness” may be innocent words standing alone. But they lose their innocence when they are used in a context where people think they have the mission to change others according to their model. Thus, African scholars should show more self-determination by taking ownership of concepts. Referring amongst others to the Egyptian scholar Samir Amin, who invites to challenge the universalism of concepts, Macamo encouraged participants to engage in producing and appropriating concepts.

Except from Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October, which was devoted to the celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the research centre Point Sud and a film screening, all other conference days were scheduled in keynotes, panels and roundtables. The contributions provided theoretical overviews and examples from the field related to the global topic of the conference. They were followed by a lively discussion among all participants. Daily sessions always started with one or two keynotes of 60 minutes each:

- Keynote I: “Retrieving Reality through “alien” concepts” by Elísio Salvado Macamo
- Keynote II: “Concepts and “dysfunctional” realities - Africa in scholarship” by Mamadou Diawara
- Keynote III: “Concepts and “dysfunctional” realities - Africa in scholarship” by Zubairu Wai
- Keynote IV: “Language as reality-producing apparatus: a postcolonial critique of African linguistic” by Rose Marie Beck
- Keynote V: „Du malentendu rhétorique. Brève réflexion sur quelques termes et le savoir à propos de l’Afrique” by Justin Bisanswa
- Keynote VI: “Les mots, les concepts, la parole sur des éléments du corps comme champ de connaissance de l’homme et de la société : cas de concepts en langue bamanan Mali” by Tiéman Diarra
- Keynote VII: “Understanding Livelihoods and Standards of Living: Livelihood Diversity in the Zone of Manantali” by Dolores Koenig

The keynotes were followed by 90-minute roundtables and panels including discussions. Doctoral candidates and post-doc researchers presented recent research projects. The presenters are listed in the order of presentation:

- Tamari Tal (CNRS-IRD France): Les ‘castes’ : leurre ou concept analytique?

- Uhuru Phalafala (University of Cape Town): Restless Natives, Indigenous Languages, and Revolution
- Florian Stoll (Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies): (Northern) Concepts and Methodologies in Africa? Reflections from research on “middleclass”-milieus in urban Kenya
- Lamine Doumbia (Institut historique allemand de Paris (IHA) and Centre de recherches sur les politiques sociales (CREPOS) à Dakar): Du coutumier et de la pratique du foncier à Bamako
- Nhamo Anthony Mhiripiri (Midlands State University/Zimbabwe): Challenges of Teaching Visual Anthropology at a Zimbabwean University
- Hélène Quashi (Institut des Mondes Africains, EHESS): L’Afrique et ses mobilités: questionner les enjeux sociaux et académiques des concepts de “migration” et d’“expatriation”
- Abdoulaye Niang (Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis du Sénégal): Humanités et sciences sociales en Afrique : discussions sur les termes du dialogue intra et inter-disciplinaire à partir de la sociologie et des mondes de l’art
- Amina Djouldé Christelle (Université de Ngaoundéré-Cameroun): Imagothèque coloniale et question de validité des concepts dans la production du savoir historique sur l’Afrique Noire
- Seydou Drabo (University of Oslo): Questioning the issue of “family planning”: reflection on the historical, political and social trajectory of a concept
- Wendpanga Eric Segueda (Goethe University, Frankfurt): Rethinking concepts and knowledge systems: South Africans’ views on their “indigenous” knowledge
- Mounpé Chare Idrissou (Université de Yaoundé I): Pour une analyse contextuelle de la pertinence du concept de jeunesse en Afrique Sub-saharienne: le cas du Cameroun
- Roland Balgah Azibo (University of Bamenda): Conceptualizing and Measuring Poverty in Africa: Challenges and Prospects
- Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi (University of Abuja): Justifying and Advancing Conceptual Autonomy for African Humanities through Conceptual Africanisation
- Preben Kaarshoelm (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin): Concepts of recognition and citizenship among freed slaves and indentured labourers in South Africa in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- Marina Berthet (Université Fédérale Fluminense (UFF) - Nitéroï- Brasil): “Dormir sur la natte des autres”. Réflexions à propos de la construction de savoirs sur le développement dans certaines expressions artistiques africaines
- Zakaria Soré (Université Ouaga 1 Professeur Joseph Ki-Zerbo): Réinventer les mots. Épistémologie des concepts utilisés dans la lutte pour les droits de l’enfant au Burkina Faso
- Médard K. Bouazi (Université Laval): Théâtre africain et invalidation de la pensée colonialiste. La geste de Bernard Dadié
- Serigne Sylla (Laboratoire GERM & Faits de Sociétés, Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis): Pertinence et urgence d’une refondation épistémologique de la sociologie africaine à partir de la pensée populaire wolof (dictons, maximes, proverbes)
- Olga Hel-Bongo (Université Laval): Le paradoxe de la représentation de l’Afrique dans les romans de Ken Bugul
- Bouréma Kansaye (Université des sciences juridiques et politiques de Bamako): Questions méthodologiques de la recherche en criminologie au Mali
- Andrea Cassatella (Al Quds University, Palestina): Methodological questions in Fanon’s Écrits sur l’aliénation et la liberté

- Silvana Carotenuto (University of Naples “L’orientale”): ‘Making Oeuvre’ in Africa: The Humanities of the Future
- Caroline Mose (Technical University of Kenya): Towards a methodological and epistemological aesthetic in researching online cultures in Africa (Working title)
- Tim Sureau (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology): State and nation-state reconceptualised with Agencement (Assemblage) theory

As mentioned above, on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October participants joined in the morning to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the research centre Point Sud. The event took place at Hotel Salam in Bamako and was co-chaired by Prof Assétou Founè Samaké Migan (Malian Minister of Higher education and Scientific Research) and Prof Samba Ousmane Sow (Malian Minister of Health and Public Hygiene). The ceremony was also marked by speeches by Dietrich Becker (Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Mali), Prof Mamadou Diawara (Co-Founder and Director of Point Sud), Dr Moussa Sissoko (Co-Director of Point Sud) and Prof Elísio Salvado Macamo, representing the conference participants.

In the afternoon, the conference resumed its normal course with the projection of the film “Vibrancy of Silence: A Discussion with My Sisters” by Marthe Djilo Kanga and Frieda Ekotto. In a fruitful conversation with Sub-Saharan women, the 90-minute documentary discusses the cultural and artistic heritage of African Women. It addresses not only the origin but also the establishment concerning current political as well as gender issues. The film is an initiative to transmit to younger generations what these women have learned as their multiple identities have evolved and fused. As Frieda Ekotto says: “In focusing the cameras upon the work of six Sub-Saharan African women, *Vibrancy of Silence: A Discussion with My Sisters*, creates a visual and archive of their work, their goals, their achievements, their hopes, their dreams and their struggles.”

The conference enabled a critical approach of academic concepts on Africa. Participants discussed the historical background of selected concepts and questioned their appropriateness with regard to African contexts. Mostly deriving from colonial time, concepts in Western languages lack in reflecting accurately the realities and often induce improper connotations. The interdisciplinary approach allowed participants to grasp the problematic of concepts from different angles. The presentations highlighted the colonial weight on concepts, the problem of using these concepts to represent realities adequately in social sciences, the position of the researcher imposed by his discipline toward the research object as well as the historical and cultural bonds that concepts should reflect.

On the whole, the conference raised the necessity to examine concepts with discernment and to retrieve their mode of production in order to raise their usefulness for Africa. It invited participants to take ownership of concepts in deconstructing and reconstructing them.

The convenors were successful in collaborating to a workshop entitled *Quel est le phénomène pour lequel l’Afrique est un cas ?* organised by the Deutsche historische (DHI/IHA) and the Centre de recherche sur les politiques sociales de Dakar (CREPOS) on October 21<sup>st</sup> 2017 in cooperation with Point Sud. All young scholars participating to this workshop were associated

to our venue. This was a special opportunity to bring together a German-African research project (*The bureaucratization of African societies*) based in Dakar with Point Sud and Africa Nko.

#### **4 Sustainability of the Event**

Africa still has a long way to go to reach self-determination, and it cannot be reached as long as it is still defined by others, hence the relevance of debating concepts. It is through self-awareness and by defining the public discourse on concepts about oneself that self-realisation can be realised. As a long-term project, the conference has given many ideas and impulses that can now be further explored and pursued.

It is intended to produce a publication from some of the paper presentations of the conference. The convenors will get in touch with Cambridge University Press for a publication, as they did for the last *Africa N'ko, Africa in the World* conference, which is currently in press.

#### **5 Participants**

1. Prof Elísio Salvado Macamo, Sociology, University of Basel, Switzerland
2. Prof Mamadou Diawara, Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany
3. Dr Moussa Sissoko, Geography, Point Sud, Bamako, Mali
4. Dr Roland Balgah Azibo, Agricultural Sciences, University of Bamenda, Cameroon
5. Prof Rose Marie Beck, Linguistics, University of Leipzig, Germany
6. Dr Marina Berthet, History, Université Fédérale Fluminense (UFF) - Nitéroï- Brazil
7. Prof Justin Biswansa, Literature, Université de Laval, Canada
8. Dr Médard K. Bouazi, Literature, Université de Laval, Canada
9. Dr Silvana Carotenuto, Linguistics, University of Naples "L'orientale", Italy
10. Dr Andrea Cassatella, Political Science, Al Quds University, Palestine
11. Dr Amina Djouldé Christelle, History, Université de Ngaoundéré-Cameroon
12. Prof Tiéman Diarra, Sociology, University of Bamako, Mali
13. Mamadou Abasse Diop, PhD-Student, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
14. Ousmane Diouf, PhD-Student, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
15. Dr Lamine Doumbia, Anthropology, Institut historique allemand de Paris (IHA) and CREPOS Dakar, Senegal
16. Dr Seydou Drabo, Anthropology, University of Oslo, Norway
17. Prof Frieda Ekotto, Literature, Michigan University, USA
18. Prof Olga Hel-Bongo, Literature, Université de Laval, Canada
19. Mounpé Chare Idrissou, PhD-Student, History, Université de Yaoundé I, Cameroon
20. Prof Preben Kaarshoelm, Sociology, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany
21. Dr Marthe Djilo Kamga, Filmmaker, USA
22. Dr Bouréma Kansaye, Law, Université des sciences juridiques et politiques de Bamako, Mali
23. Prof Dolores Koenig, International Development, American University Washington DC, USA
24. Prof Georg Klute, Anthropology, University of Bayreuth, Germany
25. Dr Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, Anthropology, CNRS-IMA Paris, France

26. Prof Nhamo Anthony Mhiripiri, Media Studies, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe
27. Dr Caroline Mose, Literature, Technical University of Kenya
28. Dr Abdoulaye Niang, Sociology, Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, Senegal
29. Modou Niang, PhD-Student, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
30. Dr Uhuru Phalafala, Literature, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
31. Hélène Quashi M.A., Anthropology, IMA, EHESS Paris, France
32. Wendpanga Eric Segueda, PhD-Student, Media Studies, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany
33. Mame Banel Sidibé, PhD-Student, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
34. Zakaria Soré, PhD-Student, Sociology, Université Ouaga 1 Professeur Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Burkina Faso
35. Dr Florian Stoll, Sociology, BIGSAS Bayreuth, Germany
36. Tim Sureau, PhD-Student, Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany
37. Dr Serigne Sylla, Sociology, Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, Senegal
38. Dr Tamari Tal, History/Anthropology, CNRS-IRD Paris, France
39. Prof Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi, Philosophy, University of Abuja, Nigeria
40. Dr Victoria Van der Land, DAAD-Lecturer, Bamako, Mali
41. Dr Zubairu Wai, Political Science, Lakehead University, Canada

Additionally, 11 researchers from local scholarly institutions in Bamako participated in the conference: M'Baye Bathé (Point Sud/ FLASH), Kama Dembélé (Institut des Sciences Humaines), Oumar Dembélé (Point Sud), Bata Diallo (Université de Bamako), Yacouba Dogoni (Point Sud/ FLASH), Issa Fofana (Point Sud/ FLASH), Youssouf Karembé (Institut National de la Jeunesse et des Sports), Rokia Sangaré (Point Sud), Moriba Sissoko (Point Sud), Bakary Fouraba Traoré (FLASH/Point Sud), and Rokia Traoré (Institut des Sciences Humaines).