



Andreas Mehler and Francis Nyamnjoh: Convivial scholarship in a post-COVID-19 era

Academic cooperation within Africa (between African Universities and research centres) on the one hand, and those outside the continent on the other hand need to be rethought in light of past and current experiences and in the interest of greater equity in collaborative research and scholarship. The landscape of such institutions has changed dramatically over time, and are likely to change even further with the imperatives of a pending post-Covid-19 reconfiguration with implications for knowledge production, distribution and consumption.

We clearly see changes from within academia. Both of us are involved with the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) at the University of Ghana, one of us as initiator, the other as member of MIASA's Academic Advisory Board. As a project it is mostly funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, but relies on substantial investment and equipment offered by the University of Ghana. It attracts senior and junior fellows to work on the broad theme of "Sustainable Governance".¹ Just like any other unit of research operating in the Global South we certainly are faced with ethical, epistemological and material dilemmas that are associated with the on-going imbalance in knowledge production worldwide.

The following challenges persist:

- The dominance of non-African writers on African issues within academic journals is striking and could be a major reason why theories and concepts, questions and proposed solutions seem to come predominantly from outside the continent. Underrepresentation is also an issue on the level of editors or Academic Boards. Many established journals can claim that they seek to be more inclusive, the problem residing elsewhere: few African thinkers would be in a position to afford investing in such – mostly pro bono - roles when they are insufficiently paid by their home institutions.
- Moreover, the global asymmetry in knowledge production frequently makes it impossible for African scholars to read what African colleagues have produced since

¹ MIASA's German partners are the Universities of Freiburg and Frankfurt, the German Historical Institute in Paris and GIGA. The German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. See <https://www.ug.edu.gh/miasa-africa/>

they are unable to access their work directly. The prevailing asymmetry between the sources of knowledge production has a direct bearing on the nature and practice of both the humanities and the social sciences.

- Material Investment in Africa’s research environment is altogether minimal. Research is rarely among the priorities of African governments or private investors. This has led to a continuation or exacerbation of an outside dependence from extra-continental initiatives. While those are frequently benevolent, the risk to perpetuate relations of dominance are obvious.
- While it is fully understandable that many African thinkers want to invest in “basic research”, it is hardly imaginable that African governments, but also other actors would provide more material input, if there is not at least promise for alternative solutions to pressing societal issues. The gap between academia, policy circles and broader society is not necessarily smaller in Africa than it is elsewhere on this world.
- Bridging the divide between the widely diverging intellectual traditions that have their origins in Anglophone, Francophone and other linguistic backgrounds is a necessity, but not easy to achieve.
- Closing the gap between a growing cohort of aspiring younger African scholars and the small elite of a global African intelligentsia, frequently residing outside the continent is another challenge.
- Female African researchers regularly encounter various structural obstacles to their academic advancement. They would not automatically profit from an equal representation of places of origin of authors conducting research.

A new challenge has appeared just recently: the Covid-19 pandemic which already has a fall-out also on academic cooperation within and between continents. Like with any other global crisis of the 21st century – take the upsurge of terrorism and counter-terrorism in the context of 9/11 or the global financial crisis from 2007 onwards – we witness a compression of time and space: As the virus expands quickly, so do competing exercises of sense-making, the frantic search for “solutions” or strategies of containment. The public attention may have been elsewhere, but effects are tangible for any form of encounter between scholars. Academic conferences had been called off. Institutes for Advanced Studies had to postpone fellowships. As a stop-gap measure, academics have joined the bandwagon of digital alternatives that have usually served as complements of in-person face-to-face interactions. Once again, hardships and risks could be unequally distributed amongst scholars operating in differently equipped institutions. Whether the virus will have a “levelling” effect is far from clear in general terms

and also particularly in the realm of academic cooperation. Rather does it shed light again on the privileges of “the North”.

However, if ever the denomination as “crisis” should have a meaning, it could also bring positive effects. But it is now that we have to act. In fact, we witness that the coincidence of Covid-19 with the Black Lives Matter discussions in spring 2020 has raised consciousness levels about privileges, open or covert exclusion linked to structural racism not least within Universities and the academic world more generally. How could the dismal status quo be overcome? By working on different levels: spirit, governance and technology. Let us only sketch some of the elements on those levels:

Spirit: Solidarity or much better Ubuntu, the comfort of being part of a community that is much larger than one’s immediate surroundings should help us to form a much more solid basis of cooperation – within academia and beyond. In particular we should rather incite instead of limiting (reciprocal) curiosity on aspects of social life that look only at first sight unrelated to “big” global issues. Furthermore humility, openness and relatedness are more rewarding than sterile competition.

Governance: Within academic institutions, but also within networks we can observe a higher sensitivity towards only partly binding rules – potentially because the opportunities (to get recruited or to attend meetings etc.) are shrinking. Never before was there such an attention on the composition of academic boards, speakers at panels, or authors within edited volumes. This might be the right moment to set standards which aim at inclusion and complementarity.

Technology: virtual gatherings, though critically lacking the intimacy of physical encounters and the productive chats in coffee breaks after a panel session, have lowered the bar of participating in academic exchanges. We see more junior and female participants at academic gatherings; old white men do not dare as much as in the past to monopolize the debate in teleconferences. However, IT equipment and signal strength is an issue still haunting scholars operating in and from Africa. This is one front that can and should be tackled quickly.

One obvious element of a future agenda is to make scholarly voices from the continent audible on a global scale – and not only on issues pertaining to Africa. In the future it will be essential to highlight vanguard knowledge production by African scholars rooted in innovative thinking, i.e. confronting ‘old’ with ‘new’ ideas. Some dominant theories in the Social Sciences and the Humanities have not fully survived their empirical test in Africa, but indeed die hard and have yet to be replaced by more appropriate theories. Where could such new ideas be developed?

Some leading social scientists dream of a return of the past and draw a romantic picture of what intellectual life was in places like Dar es Salaam in the 1960s, i.e. a place of intense encounter of some of the brightest thinkers from Africa at that time, all inspired by a pan-africanist perspective of Africa. It is highly debatable whether this could be more than an utopia and also whether the all-male composition of the group of thinkers is today still an attractive model.

But spaces to think freely from daily pressures are as precious as they always were and a number of initiatives stand out. MIASA is one such initiative that aims at highlighting ideas and innovative approaches by some of the brightest intellectuals of the continent. MIASA wants to help its fellows to develop new and grounded approaches by confronting theoretical thinking with practical needs, without, however, prescribing any directions. There is a growing need of places of intense exchange between African and non-African thinkers, striving for maximal symmetry.

We recommend research collaboration grounded on the recognition of incompleteness as the normal order of things, and that draws on ‘convivial scholarship’. Dimensions of incompleteness include relatedness, openness, enrichment, humility and action. Academic cooperation with a framework of incompleteness is predisposed to and predisposes myriad interconnections, embeddedness and inextricable entanglements. It invites openness and reaching out across borders, to explore alternatives, and to build bridges as a mode of inclusionary existence. Recognising incompleteness opens the door for connectivity and interdependence, active participation, mutual fulfilment and enrichment. It compels us as researchers and scholars of Africa to broaden our perspectives, embrace the unknown and the unknowable, and to be open-ended, open-minded and flexible in our identity claims and disclaimers.

We argue that an approach to research collaboration informed by a recognition of incompleteness as the normal order of being, would foreground conviviality in a manner that allows for Africans and Europeans (or any other non-Africans) involved in collaborative research to be more open to possible enrichment with creative, cultural, social and intellectual African potentials derailed or caricatured by the orgy of coercive colonial violence and impulse to monopolise humanity and the world’s resources.

In our future collaborative research endeavours pertaining to Africa, it would help to bear in mind the question: If Africa is part of a nimble-footed world where things and people are permanently in circulation even in confinement, how do we provide for collaborative

research that does justice to the reality of constant mobility of people and things African, European and otherwise?

A truly convivial scholarship is one which does not seek a priori to define and confine Africans into particular territories or geographies, particular racial and ethnic categories, particular classes, genders, religions or whatever other identity marker. Convivial scholarship confronts and humbles the challenge of over-prescription and over-standardisation. It is critical and evidence based; it challenges problematic labels, especially those that seek to unduly oversimplify the social realities of the people and places it seeks to understand and explain. Convivial scholarship recognises the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections and nuanced complexities. It is a scholarship that sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations, conscious of the hierarchies and power relations at play at both the micro and macro levels of being and becoming. It is a critical scholarship of recognition and reconciliation, one that has no permanent friends, enemies or alliances beyond the rigorous and committed quest for knowledge in its complexity and nuance, and using the results of systematic enquiry to challenge inequalities, foster justice and inspire popular visions, versions and aspirations for the good life. Convivial scholarship does not impose what it means to be human, just as it should not prescribe a single version of the good life in a world peopled by infinite possibilities. Rather, it encourages localised conversations of a truly global nature on competing and complementary processes of social cultivation through practice, performance and experience, without pre-empting or foreclosing particular units of analysis in a world in which the messiness of encounters and relationships frowns on binaries, dichotomies and dualisms. With convivial scholarship, there are no final answers, only permanent questions and questioning.

Bio info

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