

# Why African Studies Matters<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

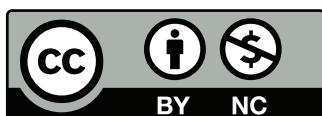
One of my tasks as the former director of the Centre of African Studies (2014–2020) would be to welcome our new Masters students each year. In my short speech, and later in teaching our compulsory Introduction to African Studies course, I would try to convey why and how African Studies matters on multiple levels in the complicated contemporary world we all occupy from such different positions. At the core of such a message are questions about where, how, and by whom knowledge about Africa and Africans – generated from within the continent and/or from elsewhere – has been/is produced, validated, circulated, published, and debated, and what implications this has/had. This set of concerns and the inquiries they provoke are unambiguously political. At stake are deeply entrenched, colonially rooted power relations that have evolved across space and time with a range of material and symbolic effects – what Kessi et al. (2020, 227) refer to as “our epicolonial inheritance” – alongside the possibilities for confronting such

dynamics of inequality and exclusion. Long histories of global and local patterns of structural violence and epistemic erasure affecting the African continent and peoples 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 (including its diasporas), 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 an accompanying lecture offered to the incoming students at CAS, I would typically focus on a specific topic related to my own research in Southern Africa, using this to demonstrate the practice of *doing* African Studies – a conscious, critical practice notably distinct from merely studying ‘something in Africa’. At the heart of such a practice, I would suggest, are at least the following three key dimensions: firstly, the recognition of a distinction between representational ‘Africa’ or “image-Africa” (Landau 2002), being a constructed idea in various forms that does par-

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ticular kinds of work (Pierre 2018; Masquelier and Desai 2018; Ferguson 2006), and Africa as a multitude of heterogeneous, trans-spatial, inter-related, lived realities; secondly, a consciousness of, and an active commitment to addressing, the historical epistemic erasures and unevennesses in knowledge production about 'Africa'/Africa, which recognizes the continent's own multiple, generative centres of theory and knowing; and thirdly, the employment of interdisciplinary and relational approaches in both research and teaching, that challenge simplifications and ensure analytical attention to the combination of all relevant and interconnected dimensions of complex African realities. The aim, in general, is to facilitate layered and reflective understandings beyond stereotypes and single stories, that explicitly counter both deliberate and unintentional patterns of epistemic ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2007) that sustain strategic unknowing of African worlds and peoples.

Despite – or because of – having been located within explicitly African Studies institutional environments in Europe for the past sixteen years,<sup>1</sup> while also being a (white) Zimbabwean scholar based in the global North, I have come to recognize that the work of defining what African Studies *is, does* – and more importantly *can be/can do* – is necessarily an ongoing and collective journey. Among other things, it entails engaging openly with a range of different perspectives and with dynamic shifts in the politics of knowledge over time and across diverse geographies and constituencies. What I hope to do briefly in this essay is to reflect on some of these broad shifts so far, before laying out my own arguments for why African Studies continues to matter in Europe and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I include my four years at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala (2006–2010), and the past twelve years at the Centre of African Studies at the University of Copenhagen, as well as being active on the board of the European African Studies association, AEGIS (Africa-Europe Group on Interdisciplinary Studies) since 2016, and its president since 2019.

## 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, as already mentioned, this does not mean that there are no distinct – and contested – positions and perspectives within it, nor that there are no tensions and contestations around addressing such issues as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, age, religion, and more. An additional part of its diverse and shifting landscape are the highly uneven structural conditions of knowledge production about and within Africa. Confronting historical and persistent distortions in resources and representation that constrain present-day possibilities for African scholars and institutions to flourish on the continent (especially regarding research and publishing, but also teaching) is a necessary concern within African Studies.

However, such critical perspectives and politically challenging agendas have not always been the norm (nor can they be assumed to be so across the board, at present). Indeed, the origin stories of African Studies in many parts of the global North have been closely intertwined with European and British colonialism. Other kinds of transglobal projects (such as neo-imperialism and neoliberalism) have also affected the form and extent to which support has been provided for (or withdrawn from) Africa-oriented research agendas and institutions in the global North, as well as in Africa itself. Well-known among these was US government 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, one might highlight the close links over four to five decades between funding for research on Africa (if not for African Studies itself) and development assistance, with its less overt yet undeniable links to the strategic geopolitical and economic interests of particular,

or clusters of, ‘donor’ countries. To some extent, and ironically so, this has actually helped to expand research on Africa in Europe. Many European countries have substantial concentrations of researchers working on Africa, spread out across different universities and in some independent research and policy think-tank institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the combination of Northern-driven developmentalist agendas and strategic concerns has influenced research financing streams in quite specific and increasingly narrow ways, shaping selective pathways of knowledge production both on and within Africa. In recent years, for example, research agendas and key research funding mechanisms, both within the European Union and in individual countries like Denmark, have increasingly (over) emphasized such themes as governance, security, migration, climate change, and China in Africa. Notably, these kinds of focus areas tend to reinforce familiarly troubling projections of Africa as ‘a problem to be solved’. This is something that Kenyan scholar and activist, Nyanjala Nyabola, eloquently rejected in a thoughtful keynote lecture at the German African Studies Association conference in June 2021, entitled ‘Africa is not a Problem to be Solved’. Denmark has further narrowed possibilities for government-funded ‘development research’ in Africa to its own shrinking number of development partner countries on the continent. Among other effects, this has led to an over-saturation of research projects in and demands on a very few countries (and on scholars and institutions within these countries), with a worrying neglect of support for undertaking a much wider spectrum of re-

search themes and topics across diverse sites on the continent. Understandably, the scale and speed of the spread of COVID-19 since early 2020 has concentrated even further the focus of research attention and funding globally, but yet again to the detriment of maintaining a broader perspective on African dynamics, concerns, and trajectories.

To return to the historical unfolding of African Studies itself, especially in the global North, constituencies of African Studies scholars and scholars of Africa have surfaced in particular places and have taken specific institutional, intellectual and political forms at different historical conjunctures.<sup>3</sup> Within the Anglophone world, in the United States for example, some of the earliest attention to Africa and to 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, as Allman (2019) recounts, stayed hidden beneath the hegemony of the mostly white and male-dominated African Studies Association (ASA) of the USA, 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 structural change occurred at that time. Subsequent changes in terms of both race and gender representation within the ASA emerged more gradually as the academic landscape of American universities and African Studies programmes diversified to some extent (Allman 2019). However, such unevenness has continued, reflecting ongoing structural inequalities within the US academy – echoed in Britain and elsewhere in Europe (Nolte 2019) – alongside wider global inequalities between African and non-African academic conditions (Mkandawire 1997; Mama 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See Zeleza (2009) for an interesting discussion of the historical development of African Studies in African universities.

<sup>2</sup> The extent, diversity, and strength of research on Africa across Europe is evidenced by the growing scale of the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) held every second year in a different European city, hosted by one of the member institutions of AEGIS. Including not only Europe-based Africanist scholars but also researchers from Africa and other international contexts, ECAS now constitutes the largest single gathering of Africanist scholars globally.

Crucial challenges to the fundamental coloniality and privileged conditions of Northern-based knowledge production on Africa have come from within the African continent over time. Sources of critique have included radical nationalist or Pan-Africanist scholars in African universities in the 1960s and 70s, Africa-wide research networks such as Dakar-based CODESRIA, African feminists, the continent's as-yet still limited number of African Studies centres, and the African Studies Association of Africa, formed in 2013. The most recent and most radical challenges have come especially from a younger generation of African scholars and activists at the forefront of Fallist and decolonization movements (but also from a range of other progressive and more established scholars and activists) both on the continent and in the diaspora. Precipitated initially by the South African-initiated #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), this also reverberated strongly in parts of Britain (Kwoba et al. 2018; Chigudu 2020), among other places. This has overlapped with the global scale #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has added further impetus to already-existing challenges within and to African Studies about the colonial, racialized, and racist structures and practices of knowledge production about Africa and Africans (Adebanwi 2016; Pailey 2016; Musila 2017).

### Studying Africa and African Studies in Europe and the Nordic region

There are, of course, well-recognized 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, especially 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) –

whether through bloodless political transitions or after hard-fought liberation wars – their postcolonial trajectories have continued to be marked by various economic, political, social, cultural, religious, and other linkages with Europe. These relationships, in turn, have shaped European countries' own social, political, economic, and intellectual landscapes, not least through different flows of migrants and displaced from former colonies and elsewhere in Africa arriving at key historical moments, and establishing significant African diasporas.<sup>4</sup> One consequence of these long (and long contested) colonial histories has been a fairly extensive if uneven spread of African Studies research and teaching centres in several of the core European powers.

In European countries without obvious colonial pasts specifically in Africa – such as the Nordics – other kinds of incentives have prompted support for research on and within Africa at different times. For example, solidarity with African liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s was especially significant in terms of Nordic-Africa relations. 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 across the continent and the shift of international support into development aid in its

4 These constitute very different kinds of diasporas from the much older African diaspora in the Americas, born out of the transatlantic trade in African slaves. This profound experience has differently informed and widened the spectrum of Africa-related educational frameworks and the focus of scholarship in the USA, with more active links between, for example, African Studies, African American Studies and Diaspora Studies. More contemporary migrations of continental Africans to the USA have further complicated the dynamics of diasporic identity politics, and broadened research questions related to African heritage. Zeleza (2009) discusses some of the tensions in these 'splits' related to several different 'Africas' in USA scholarship. Some of these issues are becoming increasingly salient within Europe.

various forms over the past five decades, much of the interest in Africa among Nordic as well as other countries in the global North became linked increasingly to development itself, with consequences also for Africa-related research funding, as previously noted.

Within the Nordic countries, development research institutes with an overt policy dimension emerged in the 1980s and 90s, mainly outside universities; these, by default, had a strong focus on Africa, given active Nordic development engagement on the continent. Examples include Norway's Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Bergen, and the Centre for Development Research (CDR) in Copenhagen, which later became part of the present-day Danish Institute for Development Studies (DIIS). Within universities, development studies departments surfaced within which research and teaching using African cases was fairly common. But most Africa-related research was – and still is – otherwise concentrated in departments of anthropology, geography, history, political science, peace and conflict, and economics, as well as in agriculture, public health, and medicine; less so in literature, linguistics, or law. In some parts of the Nordic region, remarkably dense concentrations of Africanist scholars have emerged, for example in Uppsala and Copenhagen (the latter also connected to Africanist scholars in Lund and Malmö as well as the rest of Denmark).<sup>5</sup> Notably though, across the Nordic region, only one institution emerged with a mandate specifically as a teaching and research centre of *African Studies*, namely the Centre of African Studies (CAS) at the University of Copenhagen. Established in 1984 primarily as a teaching centre, and initially offering elective and single-discipline oriented courses addressing different aspects of 'Africa'/Africa, this has developed into a compre-

<sup>5</sup> One outcome of such robust Nordic Africanist scholarship has been the transformation of the Nordic Journal of African Studies (NJAS) from its former mainly linguistic-orientation to becoming more comprehensive with respect to African Studies themes and topics.

hensive, interdisciplinary two-year Master's degree in African Studies, still the only one of its kind in the Nordic region.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in the past decade, CAS has also become a core hub of research, communication, and networking within Europe and in collaboration with numerous African research partners.

### 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 about Africa counts, where and why, and with what effects? Knowledge is never neutral or outside relations of power, and is always situated. There have been centuries' worth of books and images about Africa and Africans generated by non-Africans in different contexts and for a range of reasons. At the same time, even longer histories of oral, scholarly, artistic, and musical forms of knowledge, understanding, and (self)representation have been generated within Africa, by Africans. A critical engagement with multiple 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 persistently placing the question of knowledge production and validation on the agenda not only of those who study Africa, but even more so of those who don't. As Sullivan and

<sup>6</sup> In terms of focused teaching of African Studies in the Nordic region, other than CAS, Darlana University in Sweden offers a one-year MA in African Studies. Uppsala University offers a half-year 'freestanding' course in African Studies at BA level in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. NTNU in Trondheim, Norway, used to offer a BA in African Studies but this was discontinued several years ago. Helsinki University offers a BA and MA in African languages as part of the more general range of degree programmes in languages. A number of other Nordic universities offer Africa-focused courses but none from designated African Studies centres.

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). Assumed ‘knowing’ based on problematic and unexamined assumptions, and ignorance, can go hand-in-hand. Both can reproduce forms of symbolic, structural, social, and personal violence. African Studies is well-placed to unpack and challenge limited and dangerous forms of ‘knowing’ and unknowing in relation to Africa’s and Africans’ complex realities. It can and does contribute instead to consciously creating critical-yet-open spaces and practices of thinking, theorizing, investigating, listening, exchanging, learning, sharing, and growing in our collective work.

Confronting ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Sullivan and Tuana 2007) does not only apply to knowledge about Africa itself. Alongside other postcolonial, decolonialist, and Southern-based critics calling for ‘theorizing from the South’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), key African and Africanist scholars have posed important challenges to the hegemony of Northern or Western-based theory more broadly, that assumes universality, especially based on the particular experiences of Europe. Critical African Studies provides an important foundation from which to make vis-

ible some of the most compelling theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of human societies that emerge from research on and within Africa, but which have largely remained invisible or ignored *because* they have emerged out of studies in *African* contexts or by Africans (Nhemachena et al. 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Finally, in addition to, and in line with, the above, it is important to emphasize why *teaching* African Studies matters. The majority of students of African Studies – at least in Nordic settings – seem strongly motivated to work in either government agencies or non-governmental organizations or even in the private sector where, if possible, they can contribute meaningfully to positive transformations of African realities, based as far as possible on African terms. For those who do find these kinds of jobs, an education in critical African Studies will prepare them well for the complexities and uncomfortable contradictions of such work. This includes having interdisciplinary and relational analytical skills that counter simplifications and are crucial to making well-informed decisions; and having the capacity to challenge the highly problematic epistemologies of ignorance about Africa and the world they may well be confronted with in Northern institutions.

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