

African Studies

Forging New Perspectives and Directions



edited by

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From the Editors

Over the centuries, Africa has evoked increasing amounts of interest among a large variety of scholars. To begin with, African languages attracted groups of linguists and developed into “African studies” as such, while interest in African history, ethnology, geography, etc. belonged to the sphere of general disciplines. Linguistic studies on African languages developed as areal studies, thus, initially, they focused on Bantu, Chadic, or Nilo-Saharan linguistics, among others. Knowledge of contemporary African languages contributed a lot primarily to the development of linguistic theory (phonology and tonology in particular), but studies into languages were also successfully used as part of the methodology applied to collect testimonies about the African past for which there were insufficient written sources.

Historians believed that African history could be studied exclusively through contacts with Europeans, the more so that a bulk of written sources documented these contacts. The notion of Africa as a continent “without history” was vivid among historians until the mid-20th century. However, Christian kingdoms in pre-colonial Africa, such as Ethiopia and the Kongo, attracted special attention from Europe. This resulted in a number of European sources dating back to the 15th century. While Ethiopia’s own scripture and rich Christian culture were factors that contributed to the interest Western scholars showed in its history and heritage, it must be remembered that they did not perceive Ethiopia as Africa but as *Orbis Aethiopicus* — an integral part of *Orbis Christianum*. It is no accident that Amharic and Geez — the languages of Ethiopia — were the first to be studied in depth and were well described by Europeans. As early as in the 17th century, grammars and dictionaries of these languages were published by Hiob Ludolf. This opened the doors to the study of Ethiopian literature, which attracted considerable attention. It is important to state that the interest in Ethiopia was limited to the areas influenced by Christianity, in which Semitic languages were spoken, while the non-Christian cultures of the area only attracted the attention of scholars at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Bearing in mind this attitude, it should come as no surprise that in the case of some academic institutions, Warsaw being such an example, what is now called African Studies developed out of Ethiopian Studies.

African studies as an area of research has been in a permanent process of transformation since its beginnings, when focus on Africa was strongly connected with the European exploration of the world and colonialism. Interest in Africa accelerated in the 20th century when African countries became independent, and it continues nowadays as Africa gains a new position within the world. The perception of African cultures and history as not being subject to change, and of Africa as a continent that had not produced sources (understood as written texts) is today no longer maintained. This shift in the perception of Africa also determines the current understanding of African studies as an academic discipline. The discussion of the scope and content of African studies is reflected by their place in the academic world and in teaching programs.

In the contemporary academic world, African studies function as a field researched by specialists with different backgrounds. African languages are not only the subject of research but also the source of data necessary for a wide spectrum of transdisciplinary studies. The development of African studies involves a growing number of areas and methods, with the rise of studies into new geographical areas and subjects previously neglected. This is further developed through the combination of old methods and fields of interest with new achievements, which broaden our knowledge of the continent and its cultures. Quite obviously, these new approaches are strongly connected with developments in different research fields, which are increasingly more integrated into contemporary African studies.

The idea for this book emerged as a result of the conference “African studies in the contemporary world”, hosted at the University of Warsaw on 14th October 2014, where some attitudes and methodologies representative for the topics undertaken by scholars dealing with present-day Africa were discussed. The main aim of the volume is to present a wide spectrum of interests and trends in contemporary African studies, including the application and incorporation of old and verified methods into contemporary frameworks that provide a pan-African perspective. Another aspect of African studies undertaken within this volume is the investigation of African history and cultures through post-colonial lenses. The contributions include extensive bibliographies significant both for the topics and for further research into new areas of African studies.

The contributions to the present volume have been arranged into three main sections. The first part “**The boundaries of Africa in African studies**” discusses certain more general aspects, determining some new trends in African studies. It not only touches upon the topic of geographical boundaries, but also points at shifts in the place where African studies are conducted (from Europe to Africa), and at the inclusion of a growing number of academic disciplines, such as archaeology, sociology, political studies, into the scope of African studies.

What seems to be perceived as obvious these days — that African studies consist of interdisciplinary research concerning the whole continent — was not understood as such some decades ago. Egypt was considered a territory separate from the rest

of Africa, while the study of its archaeology and of Ancient Egypt was included into Mediterranean archaeology. Adam Łukaszewicz in his contribution raises the question of whether Egyptian archaeology is actually a part of African studies, arguing that Egypt should be included into the field of African studies *sensu largo*, as a very special branch of African civilization. As for Egyptian archaeology, Łukaszewicz suggests it can only exist in a wider African and Mediterranean context, whereas African studies as a complex analysis of a rich variety of cultures, confirmed by the content of this volume, must be developed in a global context.

While discussing new perspectives and directions, a step back is taken to show the beginnings of scholarly traditions of research into the African continent as mirrored in the personal biography of a scholar. The development of academic institutions motivated by European interest in Africa and the overcoming of barriers in understanding Africa is shown by Ewa Wołk-Sore in her contribution entitled “‘Among manuscripts and men of Ethiopia’. Stefan Strelcyn’s quest for African studies”. Wołk-Sore focuses her attention on the founder of African studies at the University of Warsaw, Professor Stefan Strelcyn. Not only does she describe the biography of this outstanding scholar, but she also presents his long forgotten lecture, in which Strelcyn discusses his determination in collecting manuscripts during his field trips to Ethiopia and the difficulties involved, resulting from misunderstandings, cultural differences, shortages of funds and lack of technical facilities. His article reveals the backstage of an adventurous trip thorough Ethiopia undertaken by one of the early researchers, but also sheds more light on his attitude towards Ethiopian studies as such. Strelcyn seemed to realize that manuscripts not framed within a broader cultural context and not confronted with the disappearing knowledge about traditional medicine and plants have no value for a researcher.

The territorial extension of African studies is clearly manifested in Elżbieta Budakowska’s text. She points out that the Archipelago of Cape Verde is a part of Africa and the subject of various influences leading to the development of Creole identity, taking the position of a crossroads or cross-world in terms of linguistic, social and political processes. In addition, due to its cultural uniqueness, she claims it should be included into the scope of African studies rather than being restricted to Portuguese Creole studies.

Aside from history, language and literature, African studies have begun to include explorations into the fields of political science. Being quite a recent discipline in itself, it has already developed many theories, based however on political systems in place mainly in the Western world, and thus hardly applicable to the African continent. In order to describe the phenomena occurring in non-Western countries, for example in the global South, new terms have been created to breach the gap. Two such terms, “state dysfunctionality” and “institutional multiplicity”, are discussed by Joanna Mormul in her paper, “New institutionalism in research on dysfunctional states in sub-Saharan Africa: »institutional multicplicity«

and the Luso-African example”. This serves as an example of how approaches to researching Africa differ; the one proposed by Mormul shows quite a different perspective to the one applied by linguists, who first describe language data and then try to interpret them in terms of internal systemic relations. Mormul starts her analysis from describing the theory developed by political scientists and then tries to apply it to the phenomena observed in Lusophone countries of Africa.

Hafizu Yakasai and Aliyu Mu’azu in “Hausa studies in the 21st century: Prospects and challenges” draw attention to a very important yet often neglected turn in the evolution of African studies — the shift of the centres of knowledge on Africa to Africa. In their article, they provide a brief description of the history of Hausa studies — a subdiscipline of African studies dealing with the Hausa language (Chadic, Afroasiatic) and its culture. The pioneers of this discipline were mainly British people working in Nigeria, while the most important centers of Hausa studies were situated in Europe or America. In the 21st century, the situation has changed. The heart of Hausa studies is now located in Nigeria, “in the hands of the Hausa”, as the authors write. At the same time, centres situated outside Nigeria have begun to shrink or disappear. This contribution also stresses another trend, in which African studies initiated by Western scholars are now being continued in African centres and conducted by Africans.

The section “**Different perspectives of studies on languages**” demonstrates the use of new methodologies to investigate language and literary resources. Research into language and literatures has always been a part of African studies, but these days it has gained a new dimension and has paved the way for studying various topics representing other disciplines. The languages are no longer seen in a purely structural way, as a combination of words and grammatical patterns. More attention is paid to their meanings and communicative functions. They are also perceived as mirrors of cultural or social values, and as sources allowing access to the traditional knowledge of a given community.

The term “cultural linguistics” encompasses the identification of meanings that are culture-specific. The linguistic data are therefore analysed taking into account the social context of their usage. Sergio Baldi and Rudolf Leger ask the question “What are plants good for?”, and describe trees, shrubs and plants used within the Kupto society to heal the most frequent and typical diseases. The list of plants, which would be a boring record of local flora if presented in a dictionary-like manner, where an African plant usually receives a vague translation as “a kind of bush” or “a kind of local tree”, becomes a valuable source of knowledge about the beliefs and healing system functioning within a community.

Isa Yusuf Chamo raises a similar problem in his article “Language and identity of Africa: the use of place names as part of a person’s name in Hausa”. Chamo shows that what at the first glance seems to be a list of recurrent names, usually of Arabic origin, can reveal a fascinating story, especially if the last part of the name (called the surname or family name) is investigated in more detail. The last

name, which in European tradition constitutes a basic part of the name and is only changed in very specific social situations, in Hausa — or more broadly in the African tradition — is vulnerable to more extensive modifications. In Hausaland, it is the first name that is given once in a lifetime and identifies the person. When it comes to the second name, it is up to the holder to decide whether it will be his father's first name (which is the most common practice), a place name or a nickname. What is more, the decision is not permanent or binding, and can be changed within one's lifetime. The motivation for changing the father's name to a place name (usually the name of the village, city or quarter where one was born) is the main topic of Chamo's article. It is worth noticing that the decision to change one's name is not always made by the holder for pragmatic or cultural reasons, as it can also be done by external agents, such as the administration of a school, in order to avoid having two pupils with the same name.

The culture-specific understanding of a notion that represents a universal concept is presented in Nina Pawlak's contribution "Between oral and written tradition: the concept of 'truth' (*gaskiya*) in Hausa". Following an introduction to the methodological background of the concept of "linguistic worldview", the meaning of the Hausa word for truth (*gaskiya*) is identified through its contextual use. Linguistic exponents of the notion of truth have been identified in various types of structures, including fixed phrases, word collocations and proverbs, but their cultural value has been recognized as manifestations of the oral tradition of the society and of the orality of the Hausa language. This tradition locates the notion of truth in interpersonal relations; therefore, the meaning of *gaskiya* relies mainly on what is said, and thus, this meaning is subject to negotiations. The interpretation based on linguistic data finds its justification in the socially-accepted attitude to the truth manifested in written texts with codified arguments and the way the term "truth" is used in the modern battle over values.

This section also discusses the issue of perceiving language as an important means of communication that includes gestures. Izabela Will, asking "To what extent African studies refocus our understanding of gestures", extends the idea of language to include non-verbal signs that co-exist with speech or replace it in some situations. Will shows that the idea of language, often exemplified by fragments of written texts, cannot be restricted to verbal modality if oral communication is scrutinized. In oral face-to-face communication, it is possible to grasp the full message only when taking into consideration other means of transferring the message, especially posture, gestures, facial mimicry. The author also stresses the importance of several factors, such as social stratification, culture, orality and language (mainly its structure and prosodic features), which influence the use of gestures. She concludes that the communicative aspect of gestures seems to be crucial for the research conducted on language throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Literary studies, which have always been a part of African studies, can be incorporated into the discussion on current topics in the globalized world: gender,

class and race. Such is the assumption of the article “Swahili women’s traditional creative writing” by Izabela Romańczuk, who shows the literary tradition of Swahili women through the lens of feminist theory. A few examples of oral texts from classical Swahili poetry called *tenzi* are used to demonstrate the collective consciousness of East African coastal societies. The analysis shows how the understanding of the term *women* is determined by cultural, social and historical contexts, and discusses the extent to which Swahili women’s subjectivity and creativity is influenced by the plurality of their identities.

The text by Seyni Moumouni, “Écriture et société en Afrique au 20^e siècle d’après quelques documents ajami haoussa du Nigeria”, evokes testimonies that in a sense have been forgotten as a reservoir of written sources for the history of African societies. The author presents three manuscripts in Hausa that are judicial opinions written in the Ajami script. The documents were created during the early stage of adopting Arabic characters into Hausa, and therefore are of special significance for both linguistic and historical analyses. Their proper interpretation calls for cooperative work among specialists experienced both in Arabic and Hausa studies.

The third section, “**The question of sources**”, is devoted to various sources for research into African history and culture. This part also discusses the issue of communication. A certain message is delivered through a variety of sources — oral and written texts as well as visual material (artefacts, pieces of art, films and photographs). The contributors to this volume prove that this message is not direct or unambiguous, and may be interpreted differently depending on a number of reasons, including the person interpreting the source and the methodology of interpretation.

Without a doubt, written sources constitute the most traditional base for scholars, but oral and visual sources are difficult to overestimate in contemporary African studies. Bogusław Zagórski in his contribution “Central African (Sudanic) Arabic toponomastics — the special case of Chad” demonstrates the value of Arabic sources, especially geographical dictionaries from the Middle Ages and contemporary publications in Arabic, for studying geographical names in Chad, or more generally in the Sudan region. It is shown how studies conducted in separate areas (Arabic, Egyptian studies) have to be incorporated into traditional African studies concentrated mainly on sub-Saharan Africa.

The sources for African history as well as African-European contacts are scattered in numerous archives in very different places. An example of the Czech archives and Czech literature, in which one can find information about Africa and Czech interest in the continent, are presented by Jan Záhorský in his article “Czech sources on the modern and contemporary history of Africa”. A great number of these sources have not yet been fully investigated.

The exceptional value not only of oral sources but also of the impact of oral tradition on local communities is presented by Christine Chaillot in “How to preserve

the history of the oral traditional education of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia: *qəne* teachers in Wašāra, Gongḡ, Sālalo and elsewhere in Goḡḡam”. Over the centuries, Ethiopian traditional church education has functioned as an integral part of Christian Ethiopian every-day life. Today the number of students is decreasing but the art of composing *qəne* (a type of oral poetry) has survived, partially thanks to Ethiopian intellectuals who collected and wrote poems down, after which they published them. In her text, Chaillot shares her experiences and discusses various facts collected during interviews in Ethiopia with *qəne* teachers, proving that Ethiopian studies has changed from scholarly interest in written texts to focus on oral ones, while some areas of interest (Ethiopian literature) remain the same as the ones which attracted researchers’ attention decades ago.

In her contribution, “The interpretation of Ethiopian cultural texts — the coronation of Haile Sillasié as a text”, Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł focuses her attention on another bulk of African texts, i.e. rituals. Rubinkowska-Anioł asks the question where the interpretation of African (Ethiopian in this context) cultural texts leads researchers. Taking as an example the coronation of Haile Sillasié I in 1930, she discusses the relativity of the terms “modern” and “traditional”, as well as what part of the message transferred through certain rituals was intentional and which performed a role that went beyond the authors’ intention.

The place of storing source material is another important factor that has to be taken into consideration while discussing communication and the message transferred through texts or objects. Many manuscripts stored in mosques, churches or kept by local communities remain silenced for the outside world, as no scholars have access to them. At the same time, they are used as religious texts or as a treasure trove of knowledge for a given community. As long as they are in use, the tradition connected to them remains alive. However, this changes when they are taken from their original places and placed in a library or museum. In such circumstances, they are no longer used as functional, practical and social artefacts. However, the objects in the new situation are still able to “talk”. They can be described, translated, provided with footnotes, and shown to a broader audience in order to become a building block enriching our general knowledge about a particular topic. They can also, especially when kept in a museum, revive the memories of one community and play on the nerves of another, leading to a passionate discussion about identity, history, politics. The issue of presenting artefacts of the past is discussed by Aneta Pawłowska in “South African museums. Representation and identity”. The author shows that the history of a country as shown in a museum is neither simple nor fixed. Such factors as current political events, sociological changes, or the reinterpretation of the system of national values deeply influence the narrative presented in museums. Pawłowska also argues that in the apartheid era only one perspective towards history mattered: the vision of the Boers who came from Europe and settled in South Africa. They were presented as pioneers and deserving victors in the struggle

for land, while the native people have customarily been presented in museums as naked full-body mannequins.

Much earlier than the Boers, another group of Europeans came to Africa: the Portuguese. They established trade contacts and diplomatic relations with many African kingdoms, including Benin or Kongo. These contacts gave rise to new phenomena. On a very concrete level, they can be exemplified by so-called Afro-Portuguese ivories: objects made mainly in Sierra Leone and the Benin Empire by local craftsmen. The patterns, way of processing the ivory and the material itself were African, but their function (mainly as luxurious tableware) and some themes (Portuguese kings or warriors) were foreign. Robert Piętek in “European institutions and patterns in Kongo in the 16th and 17th centuries” describes the development of such phenomena on institutional levels. By describing the contacts between the Portuguese and the Kongolese at the end of 15th century, he draws attention to the fact that many Portuguese institutions like the Catholic Church, schools, administration were implanted in the newly Christianized kingdom of Kongo. However, instead of taking on the same form as in Portugal, they were adapted to local culture.

The volume comprises both a traditional understanding of African studies, i.e. research into languages and cultures for which traditional methodology based on philology and written sources was applied, as well as new trends and scientific disciplines which have attracted special scholarly interest in Europe and in Africa in recent times. The volume confronts the local African attitude towards African history, languages and cultures with theories developed outside Africa. The editors’ ambition was to show the results of the investigation of similar topics from different points of view. The authors believe that this collection of different approaches will allow for a closer look at how Africanists work nowadays — after many decades of the development of African studies.

The Editors