

The Relevance of African Studies*

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African Studies seem somewhat a contested territory and notion, depending on who executes the power of definition. Such studies and their results are at times questioned and ridiculed as exotic, at times underrated in terms of their social relevance, but occasionally also over-estimated with regard to their political impact. By way of introducing the wide panorama, three concrete examples from the last decade try to illustrate the diverse points. Then follows a summary overview on parts of the recent debate concerning the definition and role of African Studies, before a last part reflects on the relevance of African Studies in a Nordic context.

Scholars and African Studies: Three cases as an introduction

In 1996 the renowned Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani was appointed as the A.C. Jordaan Professor of African Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT). In 1997 he became Director of its Centre for African Studies (CAS) – only to discover that he actually had little to say when it came to the planning of a compulsory “Introduction to Africa” Core Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty’s Foundation Semester for all social science students. As a result the thought occurred to him “that I may have been hired as an advertisement, a mascot” (Mamdani n.d.: 1). His intervention provoked a fundamental and principled debate first on the campus (Centre

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for African Studies n.d.) and later in parts of the South African print media about the nature of African Studies and the perception of “Africa” as a study object in the South African academia. As a result, the UCT campus – at that time still under the Vice-Chancellor Mamphela Ramphele, who was surprisingly (if not to say disappointingly) reluctant to take sides in favour of the Africanist perspective advocated by Mamdani - became deeply divided. At the height of the debate Mamdani accepted in 1999 another chair and left for the United States, where he is the Herbert Lehmann Professor of Government and Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. The position he vacated at the CAS on the UCT campus is since then deserted, and the intensive debate about the meaning and content of (teaching) African Studies has faded.¹ I would classify this story as an example that the discourse over African Studies is not confined to an exotic niche but has some meaning in terms of its social relevance.

In 2000 Gavin Kitching, until the early 1980s a reputable scholar within African Studies² and in the meantime an Associate Professor at the University of South Wales in Sydney, declared that he “gave up African studies because I found it depressing. [...] I was depressed ... both by what was happening to African people *and* by my inability even to explain it adequately, let alone to do anything about it” (Kitching 2000; original emphasis). His statement provoked mainly critical responses by both African and non-African scholars (cf. Postel 2003). The Executive Secretary of the Dakar-based Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) interpreted Kitching’s argument in the way “that Africa was failing to live up to his expectations as an Africanist who had invested so much hope in the possibilities of continental re-birth and progress” and concluded: “Such infantile outbursts by people immersed in an unreconstructed version of the White Man’s burden and propelled by a

¹ In his faculty bio Mamdani identifies as a secondary interest “the institutional reproduction of knowledge, particularly in what is called ‘African Studies’. This is a more recent preoccupation, on which I have yet to publish anything beyond newspaper articles.” (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/anthropology/fac-bios/mamdani/faculty.html>). Mamdani had obtained his academic degrees at the University of Pittsburgh (B.A.), Tufts University (M.A.) and at Harvard University (Ph.D.). He taught at the universities of Dar es Salaam, Makerere and Cape Town before leaving again for the United States.

² In 1981 he won the prestigious Herskovitz Award of the U.S. African Studies Association for his monograph “Class and Economic Change in Kenya”, widely considered as a classic.

misplaced sense of self-importance hardly deserve to be taken seriously for the purposes of the task at hand. Indeed, African Studies may turn out to be well-served by the decision of the likes of Kitching to quit the field and it may well surprise them that their departure has not been noticed by many.” (Olukoshi 2007: 11) I would consider this as an example illustrating the strong emotional dimension the subject African Studies contains to scholars of all backgrounds but in particular to African scholars confronted with such sentiments expressed by other colleagues.

In 2005 Botswana’s President Festus Mogae declared the 72-year old Australian born scholar Ken Good a Prohibited Immigrant (PI). As Head of State he had made use of the discretion vested in his executive powers to expel any non-citizen from the country without prior notice or any reason given. Professor Good - who in 1973 had been expelled from then Rhodesia under Ian Smith for his political role as social scientist - had been for the last 15 years residing in Gaborone and employed in the Social Science Faculty of the University of Botswana. His appeal to the Constitutional Court was turned down and he was deported within hours in mid-2005 (Pegg 2005; Taylor 2006). President Mogae declared that he found Good’s critical views in particular on the government’s policy towards the Basarwa (Bushmen) unacceptable and damaging the reputation of Botswana in an irresponsible way. He therefore acted accordingly to protect what he considered being in the national interest.³ For me this is an example that despite all perceptions of African Studies as being irrelevant, they are in practice considered under certain circumstances as socially highly contentious and at times even have a rather far-reaching political impact with considerable consequences for the individual scholar.

³ Ken Good was a member of the research network on “Liberation and Democracy in Southern Africa” (LiDeSA), which was operational at The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) between 2001 and 2006. With the support of the Swedish Foreign Ministry and the Institute’s Programme and Research Council NAI provided Ken Good subsequently the opportunity to spend three months during the fall of 2006 as an extraordinary African guest researcher at the Institute to sort out matters. He now has found some temporary shelter at an university in Sydney – maybe not too far from Gavin Kitching’s office.

What are African Studies?

A debate on what is supposedly understood as African Studies has until recently been dominated by views of US-American scholars or at least been located mainly within the network of the US-American African Studies Association (ASA). It had been challenged of lately by “Afro-centric” orientations but also by European-based scholars beginning to occupy more discursive space.⁴ The first biennial European Conference of African Studies organised by the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) end of June 2005 in London suggests that the discourse and its arenas is presently in an increasingly visible way subject to modifications.⁵

The demarcations resulting from such efforts tend to be depending more on the individual positioning of the respective author(s) than being determined by physical or genetic origin or the work context. But there is an obvious historical dimension to the matter: African Studies emerged mainly due to a colonial legacy or direct involvement of states in either the colonisation, colonial rule or decolonisation of African regions and people – with the latter as the passive objects rather than the architects of the study areas defined. The lasting effects of such legacies are still obvious (see i.a. Mlambo 2006; Wood/Dibben 2006; Zegeye/Vambe 2006). On the other hand there are strong geopolitical and strategic dimensions, which have motivated to some extent the focus on area studies (including Africa) in the USA after World War II.

Hence one of the questions one might be confronted with is that of the social and political interest: what motivates not only scholars to embark on African Studies, but allows for employment and support by state institutions in this particular academic area. Is there a more or less direct agenda attached to the support of African Studies? And if so, which agenda is this and to what extent do we agree or differ on the underlying motives? – Last but not least: how do we contribute by what we are doing and how we are doing it (as institutions and as individual researchers) to such an agenda and its

⁴ See especially the articles by Lonsdale (2005) and Neubert (2005), as well as the reflections by Chabal (2005), Olivier de Sardan (2005) and Probst (2005), all part of the already mentioned special issue of *Africa Spektrum*, as well as the “afterthoughts” by Coquery-Vidrovitch (2006).

⁵ This event brought together several hundred scholars at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The next biennial AEGIS conferences are organised at the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden (July 2007) and at the University of Leipzig (mid-2009).

implications/execution? I will return to these questions (without trying to offer answers) at the end.

The challenge starts with the efforts to define the subject and reach a common understanding. According to a US-American survey “mainstream Africanists across the spectrum of U.S. higher education appear to be divided with respect to what constitutes ‘African Studies’” (Alpers/Roberts 2002: 13; see also Kassimir 1997: 161). The following were the top rankings:

- study of sub-Saharan Africa (22%);
- study of the entire continent of Africa (33%); and
- study of the people of Africa, both in Africa and the diaspora (41%).

As Alpers and Roberts suggest, African Studies “should also include ... the place of Africa in its global context, both historically and contemporaneously”. But they themselves seem not to honour this explicit understanding when summarising that African Studies “is about peoples, both on the continent of Africa and abroad, rather than about a continent called *Africa*” (original emphasis). Over and above this in the meantime increasingly common and accepted insight⁶, however, African Studies should be more than about the people considered to be of African origin: it should include foreign interests, policies and influences, as well as perceptions outside of Africa on Africa (whatever the definition of “Africa” then is). To that extent, “Africa” is also seen as a mirror image of international relations, images, projections and their results, and one could agree with the insight the authors offer themselves under a first footnote: “it is certain that each and every Africanist would write a very different paper” (Alpers/Roberts 2002).

Martin and West (1995: 24) warned a decade ago of a “specter of irrelevance”, which they saw hanging over African Studies. They stated somehow misleadingly the obvious, namely that the future of state-funded African Studies within academia rests on shaky grounds in countries like the USA (but also the UK or Germany, for that matter), since those in social (political and economic) power have no direct interest in the way matters are researched or analysed. But that does of course not mean that African Studies are irrelevant, neither within nor outside academic discourses –

⁶ As Busia (2006: 17) reiterated, “for African studies to be at the center of diaspora studies and for diaspora (sic!) studies to be integrated to African studies is absolutely critical.”

even though if that might well have been the perception of those having to some extent the power of definition.

The relative recovery, which seems to gradually rehabilitate even African Studies as area studies since the turn of the century is however not the result of some learning process but emanates from the same logic and perceptions by those in power within the global system, who earlier on had discarded the continent as being at best of marginal interest. The new renaissance was pragmatically rooted more so within the emerging new scramble for control over African resources, in particular oil, which after 11th September 2001 in the US-declared global war against terror contributed to a revitalisation of African Studies as strategic area studies. This is a double-edged sword, as it reduces the continent again to an object of super power rivalry.⁷ It is therefore essential to join Kassimir (1997:156), who argues for the relevance of African Studies beyond the 'utilitarianism' of economic, geopolitical and strategic interests: "Local knowledge and global knowledge are inseparable and mutually constitutive". One might even go a step further and – for the sake of the argument – maintain that local knowledge is at the same time global knowledge. As Kassimir (ibid.) concludes: "both global knowledge and local knowledge are necessary for contemporary scholarship; only together are they sufficient". Along similar lines Mbembe (2001: 9) insists that African societies (like all other societies) can be located "between generality and singularity", with a "peculiar 'historicity' ... rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized." – Still, the question remains to be answered: who creates which type of knowledge and for what purpose?

Other strong arguments for a legitimate and necessary place of African Studies in the accumulation of knowledge offers Berger (1997: 5): "in order for such issue-oriented discussions to transcend parochial Western theories and data, participants with in-depth area-based knowledge will be as

⁷ The worrying trend has been forcefully brought forward and alerted to in the admirably courageous political (and certainly controversial) speech by the ASA president at the 2004 conference in New Orleans (Barnes 2004). A recent documentation provided further evidence to strengthen her analysis; cf. "Africa: Whose Energy Future?" *AfricaFocus Bulletin*, 3 October 2005. The flood of new studies on the appearance and consequences of China in Africa underlines the current indications for a new scramble over African resources and markets being in full swing.

essential as ever to true global and comparative dialogue". She also has the courage to tackle and deconstruct the highly sensitive inner-African discussions over what deserves to receive the blessing as "African Studies" in a politically correct Afro-centric view by pointing out: "'Orientalist' criticisms inevitably lump together a rich and diverse tradition encompassing writings from many perspectives ... written by scholars from all over Africa, Europe and North America as well as other parts of the world. By treating some of these areas of interest as critiques of a pristine, homogenous 'African studies' rather than integral parts of a diverse and continually changing field, some critics have manufactured a mythical construct that they have then proceeded to dismantle. Furthermore, alleging that there is an 'African' interest that scholars have neglected also assumes an essentialist uniformity of perspective among Africans, rather than acknowledging that complex individual and collective identities based on gender, nationality, language, ideology and scholarly orientation mitigate against any single specifically 'African' perspective on African studies." (Berger 1997: 9) – Unfortunately, as relevant as the identified substantive elements are, she ignores the fundamental dimension of social class and corresponding interests.

It is comforting that such necessary clarification does not only come from a prominent US-American scholar. A raging controversy also among African scholars highlighted in recent years the marked differences over what should be considered as "legitimate African Studies". As one of the most controversial protagonists points out: "legitimate criticism of the damaging effects of occidental Africanism has been transformed into an extreme fetishizing of geographical identities" (Mbembe 1999). He identifies the following main obstacles to rigorous academic debate within the interdisciplinary field of African Studies:

nativism ("as if black Africa were all of Africa and all Africans were negroes");

- a territorialization of the production of knowledge ("the false belief that only autochthonous people who are physically living in Africa can produce, within a closed circle limited to themselves alone, a legitimate scientific discourse on the realities of the Continent"); and
- a "lazy interpretation of globalisation" (Mbembe 1999; see also Mbembe 2000).

Turning globalisation into a potential asset for African Studies, Mbembe (1999) further advocates an approach, which could serve as a complementing guiding principle for the implementation of the mandate of our own institutions advocating and practising African Studies: “networks must be given priority over structures. Competition should be encouraged and the circulation of intelligence should become the rule. And, while continuing to invest in capacity-building, we must establish dialogues with both the various African diasporas and with other worlds.”⁸

African Studies and International Studies should be seen as part and parcel of one and the same package. They are not mutually exclusive but in contrast require each other. The package is also not *a priori* contaminated, as many sceptics (who consider themselves as radical anti-imperialists) would maintain. Instead I would argue that a serious discussion of the indeed existing danger of domination of African Studies by Western scholars requires firstly a strict definition of both components, i.e. the subject matter and those who are engaged. Otherwise it runs the risk of brushing aside the existing individual choices and options of collaboration and interaction. A geographical pre-determination, e.g. for African scholars being the only ones qualified and legitimised to undertake African Studies, obviously creates more questions than answers. It shows - as the “Mbembe-Zeleza” controversy documents (Robins 2004)⁹ - the flaws and risks of a similarly ignorant, pseudo-radical counter-position, which ultimately results in claiming genuine control over knowledge on the basis of particular dimensions rooted in claims of origin and subsequent entitlement. While

⁸ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza responded to Mbembe’s view with a sharp critique (“Of Ghettos and Academic Pimps”) as documented in Zeleza (2003: 391-395).

⁹ See in particular chapter 5 (“The ‘Posts,’ History, and African Studies”) of Zeleza (2003: 229-293), who among others has Archie Mafeje (1994) and Issa Shivji (2002) as prominent supporters of his concerns over African intellectuals suspected to be “mere reproductive forces in the process of globalisation” (Praeg 2005). Or in Zeleza’s own words “factors of the contemporary global system, with its insatiable appetites and capacities to absorb and commodify discursive oppositions and cultural difference” (Zeleza 2003: 44; see already chapters 21 and 22 in Zeleza 1997: 478-510). Zeleza’s scathing personal attacks on Mbembe (see esp. Zeleza 2003: 282) are insulting to an extent, which suggests that there is more (or actually less) than a mere academic discourse at stake. Rather, the differences seem to relate more so to the role(s) of the antagonists in CODESRIA or have their origin in some other personal feuds. After all, many of the opponents’ positions are not as far away from each other at a closer scrutiny, as the tone of the exchange seems to suggest.

aspects of socialisation and individual experiences (with the emphasis on individual) complement collective identities at all times and result in the uniqueness of the human experience in each and every person, we should be careful to use the argument of being “the same” or “the other” for academic controversies as a mono-causal reasoning.¹⁰

African Studies and the disciplines should be considered from a point of view of assumed strength concerning the value of truly inter-disciplinary oriented methods and schools of thought. It demands a dialectical understanding of scholarly work: African Studies benefit from the strength of the various disciplines applied and in return strengthen the various disciplines beyond the immediate space of what is considered to be African Studies. Interesting in this constellation is the positioning of oneself and of others as scholars, activists, and intellectuals (Melber 2006). To what extent allows “global Africa” to establish common denominators irrespective of origins and identities of the actors involved in the processes (politically, analytically)?¹¹ Is there a common ground to act, which is able to eliminate (or at least put aside) potentially divisive aspects of one’s personal making (in terms of socialisation impacts through shaping the individual perspectives by means of gender, social class and cultural roots, to mention just a few most significant factors)? Who plays which role in “Africanizing Knowledge” (Falola/Jennings 2002), and to what extent is this at the same time again an expression of “global Africa” – simply because Africa can only be global under the factual circumstances created and confronting us all as human beings at the beginning of this 21st century? Could it be that the challenges “global Africa” is confronted with are the challenges all human beings the world over are tasked to meet?¹²

¹⁰ See for an overview on recent approaches to position one self and the moral bases of political action in a variety of scholarly disciplines, perspectives and subjects the review article by Klaitz (2005).

¹¹ Olukoshi (2007: 10) has of course a point when he states “African Studies continues to be suffused with unequal power relations that play to the advantage of non-African high priests of the field.” At the same time, however, intellectual and political honesty should also acknowledge that there are African scholars, who exploit their self-proclaimed authenticity as a weapon in the effort to seek hegemony in discourses by resuming a “high priest” status for them selves.

¹² An interesting recent volume dealing with related issues suggests that “the inconvenient questions coming out of Africa show us ... how much more thinking, and how much more

The challenges remain, how best African Studies could be put into a meaningful praxis (whatever the meaning of “meaningful” would be!), both when it comes to scholarly research as well as teaching. – That the latter is as contested a territory, both within as well as outside of the continent, is best illustrated by two recent personal accounts from those trying to meet the challenges (Falola 2005; Parle/Waetjen 2005). Without being tempted to invade that minefield, I would instead like to summarise the reflections above by way of three own conclusions:

Firstly: African Studies and International Studies should be seen as part and parcel of one and the same package. They are not mutually exclusive but in contrast require each other. Both complement with a comparative perspective the accumulation of local knowledge as knowledge concerning the particular societies in which it is created.

Secondly: To discuss in serious terms the danger of domination of African Studies by Western scholars requires to begin with a strict definition of both and ignores that the mobility of the 21st century counteracts and reduces at least in the academic field some of the determining aspects of a primary socialisation.¹³

Thirdly: African Studies and the disciplines should be considered from a point of view of assumed strength concerning the value of truly interdisciplinary oriented African Studies. It is an issue, which in my view demands a dialectical understanding of scholarly work: African Studies benefit from the strength of the various disciplines applied and in return strengthen the various disciplines beyond the immediate space of what is considered to be African Studies.

empirical social research, remains to be done before we can really understand a globalization that divides the planet as much as it unites it.” (Ferguson 2006: 49)

¹³ An analysis of enrolment in master courses for African or Development Studies at Nordic universities might offer a surprising picture of internationalism when it comes to the original home countries of the students. The same can be said with regard to the composition of the lecturing staff. It is also revealing to have a look at the identities of let’s say researchers at the Nordic Africa Institute, where since my appointment in 2000 not a single “born and bred” Swedish citizen has been employed in one of the advertised research positions – including even the one of the Swedish Nordic Researcher! It is also noteworthy that all four programme co-ordinators employed at the beginning of 2007 are from African countries (Cameroon, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe), while both the executive director and the research director of CODESRIA had also been previously programme co-ordinators at NAI.

Olukoshi (2007: 15) maintains that “mainstream African Studies has constituted itself into a tool for mastering of Africa by others whilst offering very little by way of how Africa might master the world and its own affairs” and diagnoses a “need to be better anchored locally in ways which are organic to the domestic priorities of African countries”. The question remains, which the domestic priorities are and who is going to define them. After all, prevailing social antagonisms demand a stand also from scholars who deal with such eminently political issues like those categorised as African Studies.

The Relevance of African Studies in (not only) a Nordic Context

Let me turn finally to the question, why African Studies have (and deserve) a relatively respected and legitimate space in the Nordic countries. There are some marked features, which seem to suggest that the environment of the Nordic countries indeed makes to some extent a difference. There is an obvious historical dimension: While the Nordic Africa Institute as one of the more prominent and visible indicators for a state-promoted interest in African Studies has been established 45 years ago, African Studies emerged in the Nordic countries not mainly due to a colonial legacy or direct involvement of the Nordic states in the colonisation of African regions or people. The colonial link is – in contrast to other European countries – almost missing, if it wouldn't have been for the missionaries and other explorers/traders and their early travelogues.¹⁴ The geopolitical and strategic dimensions, which on the other hand have motivated to some extent the focus on area studies (including Africa) in the USA after World War II, have also not been a sufficiently strong explanation for developing African Studies in the Nordic context. More so had it been the impact of a particular model of international solidarity with a strong home base rooted in values and norms of societies, which came a long way from the bottom of the social ladder only a century earlier. The transformation of these societies from an erstwhile pariah status at the central European periphery into some of the most advanced societies in terms of ‘good governance’ criteria (also and in

¹⁴ This does of course not mean that a “Nordic mindset” would be by definition less prone to Eurocentric and racist biases. But it might be in contrast to other (central) European societies a bit less hegemonic and more tolerant.

particular with regard to their social policies) during the second half of the 20th century translated into newly emerging North-South relations. These were in the late 1950s and 1960s dominated to a large extent by the results of the decolonisation processes on the African continent. The impact on Swedish public awareness by the South(ern) African liberation movements in their legitimate fight against institutionalised racism was by all measurable standards considerable.¹⁵ Much impact had also the personal and political commitment of prominent and respected representatives of the Swedish political system and its core values, ranging over half a century from the United Nation's second General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld via Prime Minister Olof Palme to the United Nation's Commissioner for Namibia Bernt Carlsson and the Foreign Minister Anna Lindh. They all at different times in their individual but similar ways incorporated empathy in support of "The Wretched of the Earth" (Frantz Fanon) in their motivations and deeds, which guided their politics both at home and abroad.¹⁶ These were favourable days for cultivating internationalism in terms of seeking further common ground of human beings the world over and to learn more about each other – also through African Studies.¹⁷

¹⁵ See only the massive volumes with documentary evidence on the Swedish case presented as some of the results of the wider research project on "National Liberation in Southern Africa: The Role of the Nordic Countries" coordinated by Tor Sellström at the Nordic Africa Institute during most of the 1990s (Sellström 1999a, 1999b and 2002) as well as Thörn (2006).

¹⁶ Sadly and tragically, the lives of all four of them found a surprisingly similar violent and premature end: The two UN officials died in plane crashes at Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (1961) and the Scottish Lockerby (1988) in pursuance of their duties in midst of African (Congolese and Namibian) decolonisation processes, while the two Swedish politicians were both assassinated in Stockholm in 1986 and 2003 respectively when putting their civil liberties and individual freedoms above security considerations. Others prominently promoting the North-South perspective as part of a Nordic commitment include Gro Harlem Brundtland from Norway and Martti Ahtisaari from Finland. In addition, Denmark has produced personalities who play a key role in international humanitarian interventions, while Norway plays a significant role in conflict mediation. This adds in combination with a sound track record in honouring commitments in development assistance to a relatively high profile of Nordic countries in their relations with "the South".

¹⁷ It might be no accident that social anthropology based on extensive fieldwork and participatory observation ranks on top of the academic disciplines pursued by scholars in African Studies throughout the Nordic countries. Meaningful centres of African Studies in

Times might change, however. The “Nordic” policy model seems to be increasingly under pressure, and often the differences to the EU policy seem to be hardly any longer visible – if they continue to exist at all. Pragmatism and an increasingly utilitarian policy concept seem to emerge also in foreign and aid policy matters, which narrow the concept of “policy relevance” to that of a “think tank” approach. This is no good news for African Studies motivated and guided by the orientations as sketched above. As an “old hand” in both basic and applied African Studies (including consultancies) from the Norwegian Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen warns: “A too restrictive definition of relevance may prove to be a straightjacket, which is not conducive to building a solid knowledge base for policy-making. Donors and other commissioning bodies for research and consultancies too easily forget that relevant studies must be based on a foundation of knowledge that basic research originally produced. The myopic perspective of donors does not seem to serve that purpose and is thus thwarting the evolution of African Studies.” (Tostensen 2007: 30) In a similar perspective, a Swedish scholar likely to be internationally most prominently engaged in African Studies asks researchers to challenge the mainstream policy agenda: “With agencies like Sida increasingly becoming a think tank serving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm Africa looms even more distant and fuzzy than before. Independent and systematic research conducted free from the terms set by donors is perhaps the most important way of allowing a nuanced view of Africa” (Hydén 2007: 57).

Hence we need in conclusion to repeat the questions already posed earlier: what motivates not only scholars in the Nordic countries to embark on African Studies, but allows for relatively generous support so far by the state institutions to this particular academic area? Furthermore: Is there a more or less direct agenda attached to the support of African Studies in these countries? And if so, which agenda is this and to what extent do we

the Nordic countries include Gothenburg and Uppsala as well as Copenhagen and Trondheim. These represent four (i.e. one fifth) of a total of currently 19 European centres comprising AEGIS (see footnote 2 and for further information <http://www.aegis-eu.org>). Other prominent Nordic centres include the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen and the Institute for Development Studies at Helsinki University. Many more universities and other tertiary learning or research institutions in the Nordic countries include African Studies as integral part of their activities. Contrasted with the situation elsewhere, one is tempted to conclude that African Studies are currently better anchored in the Nordic than in many other countries - even among those with an own colonial track record.

agree or differ on the underlying motives? – Finally: do we contribute by what we are doing and how we are doing it (as institutions and as individual researchers) to such an agenda? Last but not least: If so, is this something we have reasons to be worried about and which we ought to correct?

This brings me to yet another question: how do we define “relevance” from our own perspective (vis-à-vis the one of the policy makers and public servants in the aid and foreign policy sectors) and do we allocate the resources at our discretion in a way which would show that we are prepared to put our money (and work time) where our mouths are? I must confess that at times I am confronted with second thoughts. There are a lot of double standards when we do the correct talking but lack its implementation in our professional daily practices. In a privileged working environment such as the Nordic Africa Institute we propagate an approach, which all too often we don’t follow ourselves. At the end of the day, African Studies end up as the vehicle for our own professional advancement and career without any other beneficiaries or a lack of any social impact we so often refer to as part of our noble agenda. Not that I want to advocate a new type of missionary. But true partnerships are built on interaction. Social relevance is achieved through communication and sharing on the ground. At times it also requires interference in the sense of taking sides. African Studies is not taking place on neutral grounds, neither in nor outside the continent. Scholars are facing the challenge to position themselves (Melber 2006), and do this also when refusing to do so. We refer to those obligations to be partisan many times – how often do we really practise them? Are we on the way to meet the demands articulated among others by a former colleague at The Nordic Africa Institute, who maintained that, “African Studies, to be truly in the service of Africa, will need not just a change of methodology away from the dominant approach that reduces it to an exercise in a detached – even distracted – study of the ‘other’ but also a shift of the primary audience away from the external world to the internal one, from the foreign to the local.” (Olukoshi 2007: 15f.)¹⁸

¹⁸ Just one particular example to illustrate the point: while we tend to emphasise the need for interaction and sharing of research processes and findings also with African colleagues and a wider audience in the countries we are visiting, we hardly act accordingly. A look at the Annual Reports of the Institute between 2001 and 2005 shows that there were some 20 external presentations in African countries during these five years by the full-time

What the current debate shows, however, despite all differences in opinion, is that African Studies and in particular scholars within African Studies, are very much alive and kicking. Their interests and goals, motivations and self-understanding seem to be open for a variety of controversies, divergences and misinterpretations. Such ambivalences might even be a desired result of a non-homogenous, multi-disciplinary area such as the one called African Studies. The overview presented has somehow mapped, but not ironed out the ambiguities, nor has it intended to solve the contradictions and ambivalences inherent to African Studies. A debate about African Studies will and ought to continue. – And as long as such a debate exists, African Studies will survive.

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employed researchers employed at NAI. If one deducts the "closed" presentations, which were done in the framework of a conference, only less than a handful public lectures in the true sense of the word remain for a research unit of close to ten scholars in African Studies, who are as part of their activities regularly present in local settings. In combination with the absence of any visible other form of local dissemination such as newspaper articles or other media appearances this merits the question if such performance is enough to substantiate the claim that we are not merely extracting from but also feeding back into social realities, i.e. the people and social institutions we claim to collaborate with also for their benefits and not only our own career. If we are prepared to subscribe to the diagnosis that "the health and well-being of the African university, as the highest site of research, is central to the fortunes of African Studies" (Olukoshi 2007: 21), then I'm afraid we have done very little in terms of own contributions towards an improvement of the situation.

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