



# Research in Africa – who is talking about whom?

Insights into the debate on representation, decolonisation  
and the future of African Studies

By Melanie Gärtner

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**D**ebates about who is represented and how they are represented are held in many parts of society. Who is telling whose story and how? Who is talking about whom and how? In research, the question should be: Who is studying whom and how? African Studies is an area of research kept particularly busy by these issues.

At the beginning of June, the Association for African Studies in Germany held a conference in Freiburg on the topic of *“Africa – Europe: Reciprocal Perspectives”*, exploring how processes in the scientific co-production of knowledge between European and African researchers take place and how research can be decolonised. The conference was preceded by a far-reaching debate. To what extent is it appropriate today

that an association that understands its task as bringing topics relating to Africa to a wider society largely consists of white German scientists? Do they not have a very one-sided view of Africa, unavoidably shaped by colonial history? Why is the African diaspora – that is, the communities of people from Africa scattered around the world – not one of the association’s priorities, even though it plays a growing role worldwide? And what impact do these overall conditions have on the production of knowledge about Africa?

Questions of this kind are being asked today in many disciplines in the humanities. However, they are discussed particularly extensively in anthropology. The reasons lie in the subject’s colonial heritage; after all, ethnologists were repeatedly at the service of the colonial powers and during this time created the Colonial Library, the fundamentals of a research canon that has had an impact on the image of Africa and African Studies to this day.

### Cultural anthropology: Struggling to establish a new position

Although many disciplines call for a decolonising of the sciences, that is, a detachment of the sciences from the perspective of the former colonial powers from the Global North, this particularly irritates anthropology's self-understanding, which is struggling to position itself anew. In 2008, the renaming of the scientific association from the German Society for Ethnology to the German Society for Social and Cultural Anthropology showed how self-critical the discussion is. The fact that the term ethnology was avoided following the long overdue abandonment of *Völkerkunde* is due, on the one hand, to the better alignment with Anglophone concepts, but on the other hand perhaps also to the sensitive perception of *othering* or exoticisation, which the Greek term *ethnos* implies.

Not all institutes have followed the professional association's thinking. It remains quite controversial whether the *other view* that ethnology represents is – scientifically speaking – a weakness or a strength. When it comes to decolonisation, it is about more than just a reflective use of language.

Hans Peter Hahn, Professor of Anthropology at Goethe University Frankfurt and Chairman of the Association for African Studies in Germany from 2018 to 2021, remembers his own time as a student and the debate on representation triggered by the publication *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) by James Clifford and George Marcus. The texts in the anthology dealt with how ethnography describes culture, and with the culture of writing and the associated construction of culture. This point in particular leads to intensive discussions: "The book has shaken up the concept of descriptive ethnography and thus the basis of our discipline." The consequences were far-reaching: "The humanities project of being able to comprehensively describe the world through observation has failed. Today we know: a complex phenomenon such as a society or a culture cannot be captured from a single perspective," says Hahn. Even back then, criticism was accompanied by demands to rethink scientific practice. Some ideas from that time have prevailed – be it in the form of linguistic sensitivity or in the demand for a polyphonic anthropology, often the aim of collaboratively designed research projects.

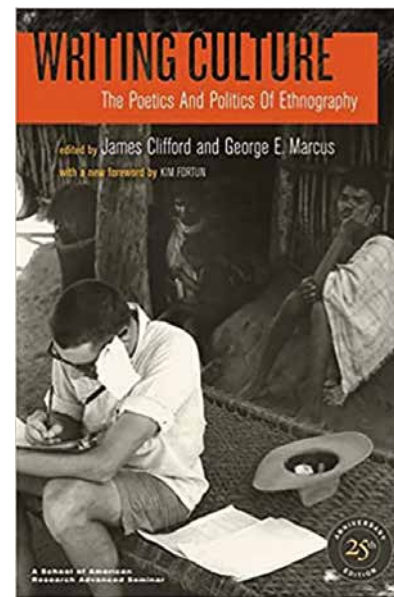
### Co-authorship as a basic principle

For Professor Hahn, however, this does not go far enough. For him, the subject would have to deal significantly more progressively with topics of representation and diversity. He still remembers with astonishment his own student days in

Frankfurt, when his lecturers did not proactively transport the 'writing culture' debate into their seminars. "I came across the publication by chance at the time, but it was not a topic in the seminars," he recalls. "This shows an inertia that is still inherent in anthropology today," says Hahn. He himself has adapted his research practice. Hahn prefers to publish with African colleagues in co-authorship and takes a critical view of seminars on regional areas. It is more important for him to train his students to adopt a reflective approach towards identity, racism and postcolonial concepts. In his role as chairman of the Association for African Studies in Germany at the time, he initiated a debate on the self-critical reflection of African Studies on the association's 50th anniversary (2019). The theme of the Freiburg conference developed out of this reflection.

The questions of who talks about whom, who is studying whom, who produces the knowledge on the basis of which decisions are made fall on fertile ground in an organisation like the Association for African Studies in Germany. No wonder. After all, there is increasing criticism that *whites* conduct research in *black* communities.

Dr Hauke Dorsch, lecturer at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and scientific director of the African Music Archives (AMA), has his own tale to tell here. In the context of one of his publications, Dorsch was exposed to the vehement criticism that he had not occupied himself sufficiently in a scientific paper with his role as a *white man*. "The article went through several reviews, in which I reflected on this and explained it increasingly explicitly," says Dorsch. In another case, an invitation to a music event was withdrawn after it became clear that he would be introducing African music as a *white man*. "As someone who has been organising concerts for decades, the idea of working with African colleagues on an equal footing is anything but new to me," says Dorsch. "That I also have to represent the music I play is a bizarre idea. When I started getting enthusiastic about the music of Africa, this interest still stood for respect, recognition of cultural achievements and a view beyond individual horizons." Of course, he understood the debates surrounding decolonisation and appropriation and welcomed the sensitive handling of diversified representation. For years, students too have demanded these debates, especially those who identify as people of colour. "But the fact that skin colour is so significant and thus genetics are the deciding factor in what a person should or should not do is a direction that I do not want to follow."



The book "Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography", published by James Clifford and George Marcus, triggered a hefty debate in the 1980s about how ethnography describes culture.

Left: An interview with anthropologists at Goethe University Frankfurt: Professor Mamadou Diawara (right) and Professor Hans Peter Hahn on Riedberg Campus, where they participated in a board meeting of the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies.

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### The right research questions are important

For Mamadou Diawara, professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of Goethe University Frankfurt and founding director of Point Sud, the centre for research on local knowledge in Bamako (Mali), this trend also stands in the way of the original call for polyphony in the debate on representation. “The demand for decolonisation is an appeal to make different voices and thus different modes of knowledge heard,” he says. “We must take this appeal very seriously.” The reasons for injustice are deep, and the decolonisation process much more complex; it is not enough to question only European supremacy. “The patterns reproduce themselves. If we don’t want to create many small bubbles in which monologues are conducted in closed circles, we shouldn’t ask the question of who is studying something, but what we’re studying and how,” Diawara demands.

Diawara himself sees above all problems in the structure of the research landscape. Researchers in the Global South are not on an equal footing, even in collaborative research projects – neither in terms of remuneration nor in their scientific role, in which they function as assistants and suppliers of knowledge, he says, while colleagues in the Global North assume the role of experts and thus have the prerogative of interpreting the results. The dependence of African research facilities on funds from the North becomes particularly problematic if topics are dictated. When research content is dictated, approaches have often dominated that would like to monetise the knowledge gathered as applied research, such as delivering solutions for development-specific questions. “The problem here is that these questions are imported from outside and thus produce solutions that have little to do with local realities,” says Diawara. “We need more space to ask those questions within the framework of basic research that shed light on specific problems on the ground. To do this, we need people who perform excellent scientific work and are familiar with local realities. They don’t necessarily have to be African people.”

If we take research performance as a benchmark, we need to ask about the structural starting point: researchers from the Global South often have insufficiently developed research facilities at their disposal to be able to mature into outstanding scientists, and this amounts to unequal conditions. Some programmes are committed to counteracting this gap, building up local scientific expertise and supporting African institutions. Examples are the clusters of excellence *Normative Orders* of Goethe University Frankfurt or *Africa Multiple* of the Uni-

versity of Bayreuth, the *Knowledge for Tomorrow* initiative of the Volkswagen Foundation, the *Point Sud* programme of the German Research Foundation or the *Pilot African Postgraduate Academy* of the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

### Knowledge production as a monopoly?

One of the scientists who has been able to expand their scientific network in this way is Professor Abimbola Adesoji, historian at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife, Nigeria. With a Georg Forster Fellowship of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, he conducted research at Goethe University Frankfurt from 2009 to 2010. He has observed that whether content is valued to a greater or lesser degree in the global knowledge market depends on where it is produced. “Some regions of the world seem to be under a blanket. It’s as if nobody expects any scientific findings from these parts of the world,” says Adesoji. “This means that knowledge is hierarchised and knowledge production is monopolised.”

That the structurally unequal treatment of scientists from the Global South in collaborative research projects is difficult to overcome is due to systemic reasons. One of them lies in the German research funding system. The demand that equivalent research funding should be made available to colleagues from Africa within the framework of a project so that they can define their content under their own responsibility is currently incompatible with the requirements of the Federal Court of Auditors when using taxpayers’ money.

In an open letter to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the German Research Foundation and the German Academic Exchange Service in April of this year, a group of German scientists, including those from the Association for African Studies in Germany, drew attention to the shortcomings in German scientific cooperation with the Global South. Among others, they called for more flexible research formats, less overregulation and inexpedient bureaucratic constraints as well as more respect when dealing with partners in the Global South. ●