

# Thoughts on “Coloniality” and “Africanity”

## Scholarship in African Universities and African Studies in Germany

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### Introduction

Ideally, scholarship should be universal, without any boundary or limitation: it should not be constrained by such extraneous factors as race, ethnicity, religion, class, ideology or worldview. But the reality is that most of the humanities disciplines that emerged or grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were defined in an intellectual environment that was heavily influenced by Eurocentrism and colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently coloniality persisted, particularly with regard to the colonisation of ideas and minds despite efforts at decolonisation. The wider implication of this was the emergence of dominant voices or perspectives that dictated the direction of scholarship worldwide. Although there have been increasing calls globally for the decolonisation of knowledge during the last forty or fifty years, particularly within the Euro-American context, attempts at decolonising knowledge in African universities more than six decades after political independence have been ineffectual. Relatively recent protests by students in the Southern African region reflect the frustrations experienced by African students and their determination to give expression to it.

It is worth pointing out that in Euro-American circles, the colonial character of the humanities<sup>2</sup> – as well as the sciences – has either been unacknowl-

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- 1 This is true of many other disciplines that emerged and developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even long-established disciplines, such as medicine, have changed their scope and range of methods considerably. Robert Koch's studies of infectious diseases provide an example of this (Cf. Bruchhausen 2019).
- 2 We distinguish here between the “Eurocentric” and the often implicit “colonial” ideology. In Eurocentricism information is collected about issues regarding European so-

edged by representatives of the disciplines concerned or denigrated as being irrelevant. Calls to consider the colonial character of scholarly knowledge about history and society began in the 1970s (Asad 1973; Leclerc 1972), but, at that point reflections on implicit biases were often marginalised or dismissed as irrelevant to the questions perceived as central at the time. The colonial legacy of knowledge in many disciplines, including anthropology, history, archaeology and philosophy, was then perceived as a phenomenon of the past. Leading representatives of these subjects denied colonialism's lasting influence on the production of knowledge prior to, and even after 1970. The conviction of their own scientific objectivity dominated.

Although efforts at promoting knowledge about Africa and African studies have advanced, they have nevertheless remained largely situated within the Western epistemological and ontological paradigm. Consequently, their methodological and theoretical approaches and perspectives have been largely informed by Western thinking.

One indicator of the neglect of non-Western perspectives on knowledge and thought is the marginal status held by African philosophy until very recently. It was not until 2015, for example, that the first overview of African political philosophy was published in German (Dübggen and Skupien 2015). Another significant example is the evaluation provided by Kwame Nkrumah whose recognition as a philosopher was delayed until 2020.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the logic of catch-up development, which was dominant in Africa, was based on the idea that fundamental ways of understanding and evaluating society in Africa did not require independent reflection. Science in Africa was seen primarily as a matter of applying models previously developed by, in, and for Europe. This attitude also affected the structure of universities in Africa:

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cieties, cultures and history and thus implies an (often unconscious) neglect of other parts of the world. "Colonial ideology" is linked, but, in addition, refers to non-European societies and cultures as "inferior". Very often, images of the supposedly inferior character appear without further explanation, and the legitimising character of such images is not made explicit. Locating the "other" within the past, or defining them as being "child-like", or as "people without history", is undeniably related to a colonial ideology (Blaut 1993; Quijano 2000).

<sup>3</sup> As has been shown only recently, Nkrumah's work on "consciencism" can be read as a critique of Immanuel Kant's work (Nkrumah 1964). However, European scholars failed to acknowledge this because a dialogue involving Kant versus Nkrumah was not considered plausible (Uimonen 2020).

"applied sciences" appeared more important than subjects that did not seem to have any direct applications.

As these examples show, it is important to improve global awareness about Africa and to ask pertinent questions: for example, how is Africa being studied? In other words, how is the knowledge about Africa that is discovered by Africans and non-Africans alike being made known? Who determines what is to be studied or known about Africa? What perspectives, approaches or world-views influence knowledge production both generally and concerning Africa specifically?

Of particular importance to African studies are the African Studies associations situated in Western universities and countries (e.g., African Studies Association in the UK (ASA-UK), German African Studies Association (VAD), Associazione per gli Studi Africani (Italy), Nederlandse Verengiging voor Afrikastudies, and others).<sup>4</sup> The emergence, programmes and activities of these organisations, spanning several decades, have promoted the field of African studies, but, in a way, they have also constrained it. Critical questions still need to be asked: how inclusive, involving or accommodating are Africans in these associations or in other fora in their quest for knowledge production both in Africa and about Africa? The way in which the issues involved are responded to has raised fundamental questions about the nature of scholarship in and about Africa.<sup>5</sup>

## **Coloniality, decoloniality and Africanity: A discourse**

As a tenacious project, colonialism has reinvented itself in different forms including neocolonialism and coloniality. Such reinvention is testimony to the fact that the process of decolonisation that led to the independence of most African states did not inevitably bring about the end of colonialism. Rather, the independence period marked the beginning of another long phase in which the hegemonic structure of asymmetric forms of relations between the Western

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4 At the ECAS conference in Edinburgh (12<sup>th</sup> June 2019) a panel organised by one of the authors (H.P. Hahn) brought together leading representatives of the African Studies Association mentioned above.

5 It is recognised today that in the case of the US-American ASA, scholars were not quite inclusive. In contrast, white domination and the exclusion of black scholars was initially an obvious, although never made explicit, strategy (Allman 2019).

world (Europe and North America) and the so called “Third world” prevailed. After referring to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s work (1986), and summarising his own position, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015a: 488) provides the following definition:

“Coloniality is, therefore, an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, which lies at the center of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world. At the center of coloniality is race as an organizing principle that not only hierarchized human beings according to racial ontological densities but also sustains asymmetrical global power relations and a singular Euro-North American-centric epistemology that claims to be universal, disembodied, truthful, secular, and scientific”

Africa falls within what scholars have described as part of the postcolonial neocolonised world and the postcolonial neocolonial world (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1995; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). While the former term describes the structural, systemic, cultural, discursive, and epistemological pattern of domination and exploitation of Africa by the colonisers, the latter not only captures failed liberation projects that gave birth to independent-dependent African states, but also depicts an “African state of ‘becoming’ that never materialized” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 4). Characteristic of coloniality are the Western projects of modernity, globalisation, entrenched epistemological hegemony, subtle manipulation and perennial domination of the postcolonial neocolonised economy and government. As argued by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, at the core of struggles in the postcolonial neocolonised world is the question of knowledge production and dissemination, besides the important issue of freedom (ibid.: 19–28). Coloniality and decoloniality, therefore, are not subjects locked in the past, but they simultaneously represent a memory of the past that either validates or establishes limitations on the valuation of the present, and promotes a movement towards the emancipation of postcolonial decolonised people.

Still following Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015b: 15), coloniality should be distinguished from colonialism as it refers to “long-standing patterns of power” and is relevant well beyond the activities of various colonial administrations in the past. This argument is further explored by Maldonado-Torres (2016: 10), who aptly captures the core of coloniality and decoloniality (as distinct from colonialism and decolonisation) when he notes that “coloniality and decoloniality refer to the logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power created by the

massive processes of colonization and decolonization". The enduring nature of this matrix of power imprinted by the Euro-North and America gave birth to the hegemonic universalisms known as "Western civilisation" and "Western modernity."

Hence, if coloniality reveals continuous dehumanisation of the world and perpetuates Western hegemony, decoloniality represents the drive to rehumanise the world. It is a movement that seeks to break "hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world." (Maldonado-Torres 2016: 11).

Decoloniality concerns both economics and academia. While the focus in economics is on overcoming unequal "terms of trade", the idea of a paradigm shift applies to scholarship (Misgav 2010). Decolonial science, whether history or anthropology, must develop a different conception of Europe (Chakrabarty 2000). Overcoming coloniality has so far been only partially successful. Despite the rich forms of institutional education present in pre-colonial Africa, European colonisers succeeded in imposing the phenomenon of under-education, along with exploitative research practices and racist theories of knowledge, using these as instruments of colonial subjugation (Kessi et al. 2021). Scholarly education and research were never intended for all thinkers and knowers and not meant to promote inclusive human progress. Accordingly, the Western university and intellectual property rules first achieved their diffusion through global imperialism and the global knowledge economy that prevails to this day. An indication of this thesis is the dominance of English as the language of science, a usage which suppresses indigenous languages and regionally specific scientific structures. Language, knowledge and epistemic orders reinforce each other.<sup>6</sup>

Education and knowledge production in postcolonial Africa is characterised by independent-dependence. African scholars and students are

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6 This holds true in spite of the fact that English is currently becoming a *lingua franca* for scholarly texts. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that monolingualism in science exerts considerable negative effects on scholarship and the intellectual potential of authors (cf. Horner et al. 2011).

trapped in the Western epistemological model.<sup>7</sup> This independent-dependence – understood as African peoples' perennial attachment to Euro-American thoughts, knowledge production, and dissemination – has been interpreted by scholars as “coloniality of knowledge” (Quijano 2000). Maldonado-Torres (2016) notes that apart from national culture and the media, education and academic scholarship are potent instruments for reproducing Western-centric modernity and colonialisation in the neocolonial colonised world.

Knowledge production, dissemination and circulation are important ways in which the Western hegemony has been entrenched and maintained since the colonial period. Coloniality of knowledge is characterised by the tendency to marginalise non-Western scholars and epistemologically designed to keep them on the lowest rung of the knowledge ladder. This is sometimes perceived as a war of attrition by scholars from the Global South. The enduring psychological and epistemological effects of coloniality are best termed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni in the citation above.

The coloniality of knowledge is maintained by the Euro-North American states through the use of a number of instruments. The first is the remapping of the world and an associated racial hierarchisation of knowledge. Ex-colonies are remapped and renamed based on new racial categorisations and assumed intelligence: for example, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>8</sup> Second, coloniality is maintained through appropriation and monopolisation of all instruments of knowledge production and dissemination. From the education curriculum through to the method of knowledge production and subsequent publication, Euro-North American states and teaching structures dominate.

The third instrument is the deployment of subtle seduction via the affordances of funding and the media. The politics of academic funding has contributed to subjective knowledge production and dissemination in the Third World, a development aptly captured by the saying, “he who pays the piper calls

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<sup>7</sup> Regardless of whether one considers Western epistemologies to be multiple or homogenous, it is obvious that differences on a global scale are more significant. Anthropological theory on ontologies was, amongst other things, inspired by the fundamental differences between Amazonian and Western ontologies (cf. Descola 2005; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, it would have been very possible to create a cultural space like the “Indian Ocean littoral”, or to base educational institutions on trans-Atlantic relations.

the tune" as noted by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015a: 485–486). These instruments are still used to perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge in the postcolonial colonised world.<sup>9</sup> Current principles of international cooperation and development practices do not always sufficiently reflect the continuity of marginalisation and poverty. Thus, financial support is often designated for predefined purposes and limited to offering short-term assistance simply to achieve pre-determined objectives, whereas the development of local academic knowledge and proper reflection on the nature of development is not supported (Hahn 2021).

The title of this contribution uses the term "Africanity" in order to relate to efforts directed towards making African perspectives known and heard, but without necessarily eliminating informed scientific knowledge. Africanity connotes the idea of academic freedom, otherwise conceived as Africanisation or de-corporatisation (Nyamnjoh 2015). Nyamnjoh identifies insufficient will and an absence of sustained commitment by African scholars – rhetoric apart – as some of the factors responsible for the non-Africanisation of curricula, pedagogical structures, or epistemologies in African universities. Despite the fact that universities have Africanised their personnel, revisions have not been effected in a systematic and productive manner following decolonisation (Nyamnjoh 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Drawing from the insight that identities are complex and often composite, and that there is a lot more, and also a lot less, to things than meets the eye, Nyamnjoh argues that it is not merely because one *is* or *appears* African that one is necessarily going to be critical of colonial intellectual traditions, rituals, and habitus in one's teaching and research, or offer a menu sensitive to local realities and "endogenous" epistemologies (Nyamnjoh 2015; Hountondji 1997).

Nyamnjoh therefore argues for epistemological inclusivity at African universities, a goal to be achieved by going outside the academy and drawing inspiration from the personal stories and creative imagination of popular Africa. Such sources were ignored under colonialism and regarded as being too "savage" and "primitive" to share a table with European colonial enlightenment. Consequently, they were often misrepresented in the postcolonial era not only by ill-adapted curricula, epistemologies, and theories, but also by many academics and scholars who subscribed to trans-Atlantic scholarly

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9 Some scholars are therefore calling for a fundamental change, in order to create the conditions for an alternative academic structure (cf. Marboeuf and Ben-Yakoub 2019).

canons, practices, and standards of value in knowledge production and consumption (Nyamnjoh 2015; Mamdani 2007). Nyamnjoh also makes a case for intentionality in critically questioning (deconstructing) conventional theories, methodologies, and research.

Such deconstruction of existing concepts, rules of engagement, procedures, and processes of scholarship would contribute to promoting African universities and the research networks they fund. Importantly, it would also forge awareness of the risks of intellectual bandwagonism that may result when Africans unquestioningly participate in research and debates on themes already determined and conceptualised by others. This matters when those “others” operate outside African social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical contexts and experiences. Often there is little problematisation of the frameworks of the theories and methodologies at play. Such bandwagonism, shaped by intellectual fashion designers, with little or no regard for the African contributor or consumer – with provision mainly for lecturers and students reduced to potted plants and clearing officers for cheap and untested and often ill-adapted intellectual and academic imports – is a persistent serious threat to Africa’s intellectual affirmation (Nyamnjoh 2012: 138).

An impressive example of the possibilities created by a change of perspective is constituted by a range of disparate works on the history of the former German and French colony of Togo. For forty years, the work of a former French administrator, Robert Cornevin (1959), was considered the standard work on the history of Togo due to its comprehensive consideration of both German and French sources. From 1997 onwards the former president of the University of Lomé, Nicoué Gayibor, set out to provide a “History of the Togolese” instead of a “History of Togo” (Gayibor 1997). With this nuance of the title, Gayibor refers to the colonial character of the country’s territorial borders, and at the same time focuses on the different population groups, religions, occupational and other social groups. Instead of presenting a grand synthesis (as did Cornvin), Gayibor assembled contributions from numerous Togolese and international authors. Although this work is not free of controversial and possibly subjective opinions of individual authors, the reader can clearly discern an attempt to shake off colonial historiography and to unfold the possibilities of an independent decolonial perspective on the history of the people of Togo (Glasman 2008).

In numerous departments of history in many universities in African countries, historians have set out to revise the historiography hitherto dominated by Western authors. Joseph Ki-Zerbo should be mentioned here as one of the

outstanding protagonists. The appropriation of African historiography makes a valuable contribution to the articulation of regional and national identity and such efforts can be understood as an important step towards decolonisation. Similarly, Nyamnjoh argues for making explicit the elements of knowledge that have hitherto been suppressed or largely ignored. His plea is for new approaches that respond to contemporary challenges and aspirations (Nyamnjoh 2012). To some extent, historians have managed to do this without resorting to the loud but stark reminder of South African scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni or Maldonado-Torres.

Still following Nyamnjoh, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) might be an institution capable of uniting such academic efforts on a level that goes beyond individual universities and countries in Africa. CODESRIA empowers scholars to engage in robust academic debates and academic freedom programmes across campuses from Dakar to Dar es Salam, Ibadan and Kampala, as well as enabling them to publish in Africa (Diouf and Mamdani 1994; Mkandawire 2005). Of importance here is the fact that some decolonisation activities have been in progress for at least 30 years despite the devastating picture sketched in some recent and frequently quoted oeuvres on "coloniality". The relevance of this term relates to the persistence of many of those issues that decolonisation was meant to correct or address. It is the enduring nature of the problem that legitimises such a concept as coloniality.

### ***Understanding and appraising Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland (VAD) (African Studies Association Germany)***

But what about scholarship on Africa in Europe? The following section will take a closer look at Africanist scholarship in Germany as one of this chapter's authors (Hahn) was head of the professional association of African Studies in Germany (VAD) from 2018–2021. This institution has a clear commitment to the decolonisation of academia (with a focus on humanities) and works to advance the public image of Africa in Germany. However, it is appropriate to ask whether the actions of the VAD correspond to its self-image and whether the achievements of such a professional association make a significant contribution to promoting a sustainable and appropriate image of Africa to the European public.

The history of the African Studies Association in Germany followed the trajectory of the growth of African Studies in Germany. It is generally agreed that 1969 was the year in which that association was formally instituted by members of the University of Marburg in Germany, although the development leading to this event had begun long before in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Initially known as the Association of Africanist Scholars in Germany, and modelled on the German Oriental Society,<sup>10</sup> this association was originally conceptualised as a regionally defined scientific and interdisciplinary forum. Its objectives were the promotion and exchange of ideas between scholars of African Studies working within the university setting and beyond, surpassing national and disciplinary borders.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, the history of Africa-related research transcends the beginning of its formal institutionalisation having been initially conceived and dominated mainly by linguists as a forum for new ideas and new interdisciplinary work. The focus later shifted in favour of members coming from the social sciences. Thus, starting from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the contributions of personalities like Heinrich Barth and Friedrich Ratzel, both geographers, African studies took a leap forward. Further impetus was provided by the involvement of others, such as Leo Frobenius, with his emphasis on the study of “cultural provinces” – a sphere or subject built upon by Bernhard Ankermann and Wilhelm Graebner (on the futile character of this approach to African history see Hahn, 2001). Others, including Richard Lepsius, Carl Meinhof and Diedrich Westermann, built further on the foundation laid so that by the end of the colonial period, African studies had developed systematically as an academic discipline (Probst 2005). Interestingly the aspect of “applicability”, in the sense of “serving the colonial idea”, that had been explicit from the very beginning of the departments became less pronounced later on but was still an implicit option for defining the presumed utility of these academic institutions. The continuity from “educating colonial administrators” to “educating development experts” is obvious, although this was

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<sup>10</sup> The famous *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, founded in 1845, claims to be the oldest Orientalist association in Germany. It explicitly includes Africa within its regional scope ([https://www.dmg-web.de/page/home\\_de](https://www.dmg-web.de/page/home_de))

<sup>11</sup> Felix Brahm, “40 Jahre Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland (VAD), 1969–2009” [http://www.vad-ev.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/FelixBrahm-40JahreVAD.pdf](http://www.vad-ev.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/FelixBrahm-40JahreVAD.pdf); African Studies Association, Germany VAD e.V <http://vad-ev.de/en/>

reflected only by very few Africanist scholars. An example of such a reflection is provided by Helmut Straube (1971).

Meanwhile, the traditional centres of African studies in Germany, namely, linguistics and anthropology, did not form a joint association until the Marburg initiative which was championed by a group of young linguists. This move was meant to overcome African studies' concentration on linguistics and to widen the term *Afrikanistik* with a view to opening the field for representatives of other disciplines dealing with Africa. The constitution of the Association stipulated, accordingly, that *Afrikanistik* should be conceived as a contemporary interdisciplinary, critical, and self-reflexive project actively engaged in collaboration with African colleagues (Straube 1971: 415–416). Interestingly, with the perception that the original aim of the association – which was a genuine discussion of linguistic questions in an open, constructive dialogue with other disciplines – had failed, the founders of the VAD formed their own conference platform, the *Afrikanistentag*, in Cologne in 1978 (VAD 1970). But the continued growth of African studies in Germany from the 1970s, particularly following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, greatly aided and sustained the association (Probst 2005).

The formal inception of the VAD in 1969 provided ample opportunities for a proper coordination of activities related to the promotion of African studies. Such activities include the promotion of research on contemporary societies in Africa, regular meetings of Africanist scholars to facilitate exchange of ideas and information sharing, especially concerning on-going and proposed studies, as well as grants available. Also included are regular visits to Africa for updating individual and group researchers' knowledge: such visits often being sponsored by the German research foundation, *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. Beyond the establishment of study centres and the implementation of programmes (some of which preceded the formation of the VAD) one major method employed by the VAD to promote African studies was the holding or organisation of biannual conferences with specific themes. These events have been directed towards probing specific issues and problems and aimed to generate knowledge rooted in clear academic and practical relevance to the African continent. Some of the conferences have also been geared towards deepening African studies in Germany (Probst 2005: 416).

What is obvious in the promotion of African studies generally in Germany, as in other locations outside of Africa, is the desire to know more about the continent: its land, people and culture, and in the process to deepen German society's understanding of Africa. The need to know provides a basis for a deeper

investigation, sometimes necessitating collaborative research spanning both the European and African continents.<sup>12</sup>

Although one might have expected that such collaborative research might provide a basis for efficient and sustainable policy intervention in African affairs, this was hardly ever the case. Instead, it proved impossible to establish routines of policy consultation because political representatives preferred to consult economists, lawyers, or regional experts from private research institutes rather than the VAD. Possibly, the government-critical positions of certain members of the VAD, who often publish in the media, have been sufficient reason for the representatives of various ministries of the federal government not to contact this professional association or to ask for its advice. An open confrontation took place in the 1980s in the context of the anti-apartheid movement, which manifested itself not only in Germany, but in many European countries.

A memorandum, co-sponsored by the VAD and published in 1986, caused considerable criticism of the government's political position on apartheid (Bley 1986). In retrospect, there can be no doubt that this initiative successfully undermined the South African apartheid regime's credibility in Germany, and as a result, state and economic actors gradually withdrew from their involvement there (Kössler 2015). In retrospect, it is relevant to ask whether this influence and the sharp, publicly aired controversy could be described as a "decolonial" activity. Should the VAD have renounced this initiative because of its self-image, or should it have shaped it differently? The answer is not obvious and it is also not easy to decide in which situations precisely solidarity can be considered a decolonial activity (Kössler and Melber 2002).

Further examples of such critical engagement by VAD members could be cited at this point, because the activities undertaken by them are important in shaping the identity of this professional association and stand as visible signs

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<sup>12</sup> It would be a timely and valuable research project to compare the activities of such professional associations throughout Europe. The first initiative of this kind was undertaken by one of this chapter's authors (Hahn) by organising a roundtable at the ECAS 2019 conference in Edinburgh (<https://ecasconference.org/2019/panels#7580>, last accessed 2022-02-05). Representatives of six national African Studies associations (from Britain, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Czechia) participated. The differences in the respective agendas and priorities of these participants proved to be much more substantial than expected. There was considerable disagreement especially with regard to the impact of experts' advice on respective national policies.

of its political positioning in the complex and contradictory field of the German government's Africa policy. Although, undeniably, one can speak about "agency" in this context, it is also obvious that the professional association as a whole has limited possibilities for action. In the majority of cases, the VAD has not succeeded in convincing politicians to act in order to overcome inequality or injustice.

A major failing is the VAD's neglect of Africans and People of Colour (PoC) in Germany. It is a lamentable shortcoming that African European Studies have, so far, not been established in Germany (Espinoza 2019). The VAD should probably have been active in the field over a much longer timespan. As things stand, this professional association's contribution in the fight against racism in Europe is far less than could have been expected (Essed 2019).

Ultimately, history will decide whether such initiatives can be considered useful in terms of "decolonisation", or whether they were futile, and purely academic exercises. It is obvious that the VAD has exerted a limited influence on perceptions and interpretations within the larger context of what has been identified as "coloniality" in the Euro-American public sphere. Pertinent in this regard is a common saying used by historians: "facts are sacred, opinions are free". Whereas facts about African politics as well as facts about history written by African historians cannot vary, different perceptions – often influenced by certain extraneous considerations – play a major role in how those facts are interpreted, the meaning that is made out of them, and the use to which they are put.

A challenge remains for African and German scholars and researchers. The immediate consequence of this is often the sheer impossibility of presenting a balanced perspective on issues. Given the dominance of Western interpretations and perspectives, the permanent suspicion about whether unbalanced or jaundiced perspectives are at play too often results in the relegation of Africa – and the African voice not being heard on African matters.

This problem aligns with Nyamnjoh's observation that "knowledge production takes place in a world of interconnecting global and local hierarchies informed, among other things, by race, place, culture, class, gender, and age" (Nyamnjoh 2019). Given these limiting factors of objectivity and the particular disadvantageousness of Africanist scholarship in Europe, a cautious evaluation should be adopted.

In the words of Nyamnjoh, "incompleteness" is a social reality and forms of knowledge generation depend on interconnections, relatedness, open-endedness, and multiplicities (*ibid.*). Although overcoming coloniality cannot be

achieved in an absolute form, such an endeavour will always remain an ideal to follow, despite the fact that it could prove difficult to achieve in day-to-day interactions.

Nyamnjoh argues that the many challenges to academic freedom are shaped in part by identity politics and the hierarchies of humanity, as well as by the racial, ethnic, class, gender, generational, or religious backgrounds of those seeking, denying, or being ambivalent about seeking such freedom – yet he makes a case for “convivial scholarship”. This he describes as a scholarship that, rather than dwelling on zero-sum games of absolute winners and losers, instead encourages a disposition of incompleteness and the humility of doubt, finding strength in the themes of interconnection, interdependences, compositeness, and incompleteness of being (Nyamnjoh 2017).

It should be pointed out, however, that although this development could be seen as a relevant issue at the level of the VAD, it is more appropriately situated at the level of universities and centres where teaching and research is done and from where VAD membership is drawn. Arguably this could never have become an issue at the association level but for the existence of the teaching and research centres which define and implement the research agenda and give it power.

## Conclusion

Whereas African studies scholarship could perhaps not have attained the level it has reached in the West, scholars are nevertheless persevering to promote studies about Africa. Although African studies associations like the VAD, which have supported studies about and in Africa, have made important advances, they have had to struggle with particular constraints given the limiting influence of the political environment in which they operate.

A remarkable parallel should be pointed out here. As shown with the example of historians in Africa, academic initiatives in Africa have to battle to appropriate the production of knowledge and the formal design of knowledge transfer with societies in Africa, and thus to highlight the specificity of knowledge production in Africa. Similarly, a professional association such as the VAD is repeatedly faced with the challenge of positioning itself critically in a public sphere that often has little interest in the special insights and the state of knowledge of Africanist scholars. In both cases, there are specific concerns that

are of essential importance for Africanity, and which have a hard time in an environment of a still dominant coloniality.

As things stand today, it is not easy to decide whether the initiatives of the scholars in Europe and in Africa, mentioned in this article as examples, can be evaluated as part of the struggle against coloniality. It is probably too early to evaluate the contributions of specific initiatives in this struggle. It is also a matter of scholarly honesty, and of respect for future historical assessments, that such evaluations must be left to the historians of future generations.

Respect for the facts, and caution with regard to evaluation and interpretation, should at the same time be taken as a criticism of the South African authors cited several times in this chapter. It is easy to develop a universal paradigm like "coloniality", but it takes a lot of careful empirical work to identify hard facts that allow a reliable assessment of individual events within the framework of this universal paradigm. The progress of knowledge would not be served well if it remained under the blanket judgement of a "coloniality" that has been widespread worldwide for centuries. It is possible to consider what scholars such Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres are doing as a continuation of what Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Nicoué Gayibor, Jacob Ade-Ajai and others started in their generation. Perhaps what has changed is the increased vocality and the daring attitude of new generations of scholars given the persistence of the same problem and its transmutation (colonialism has transmuted to neocolonialism and is persisting with coloniality). For the sake of historical honesty, it is necessary today to judge the actions of courageous scholars – such as the historians in West Africa mentioned above, or the Africanist scholars in the VAD in their fight against apartheid – with caution and differentiation.

Regardless of what assessments may be made in the future, African scholars in Europe as much as in Africa should work tirelessly, now, not only to sensitise the public to the continuing contradictions of coloniality, but also to promote scholarship on Africa. Indeed, rather than keying to already established or popular buzzwords, or just tagging along, Africans can actually set and drive research agenda both at home and on the international platform provided by various African Studies associations. What is required is proactive commitment and a desire to excel limitations – plus the aid of adequate research funding from governments and organisations on both continents: Africa and Europe.

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