

Knowledge Lab

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The Knowledge Lab has been an essential pillar of the inter- and transdisciplinary work of the two phases of the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple. Reconfiguring African Studies.” It was designed to build the wonderland of academic inquiry, a studio for new and profound insights, where the clear source of collectively created wisdom never dries up!

Composed of two highly valued words—*Knowledge*, the Apollonian substance of academic activity par excellence, euphoric and powerful; and *Laboratory*, the place where this substance is alchemically produced—the Knowledge Lab of the Africa Multiple Cluster (AMC) 1.0 was to offer completely new collective forms of work. It was designed to mobilize long-cherished wishes and bold dreams of true and efficient intellectual encounters; it offered the canvas for divergent ambitions to bring about transdisciplinary production.

Indeed, the Knowledge Lab (KL) was not only designed to interlink the African Cluster Centres (ACC), the Bayreuth Academy, and the work of the Cluster's Research Sections, and to assemble the Cluster's academic members and their research projects to exchange ideas and methods, to engage in debates and systematic reflection. At the same time, it was also expected to integrate artists and activists and to stimulate transdisciplinary synergies. It was composed so as to provide the Cluster and its scholars with varied event formats, from frontal to interactive or open ones, and to include academics, activists and artists to encourage venturing and thinking outside one's boxes: academic lectures or seminars, but also performances or artistic productions, suited to the respective groups with their specific needs and topics. Joint virtual writing sessions or research tandems stand side-by-side with virtual classrooms, method studios, or clashing theories seminars. Not to forget decentral and flexible formats that take place *ad hoc* on the members' initiative or request.

The Knowledge Lab was meant to become a space to create a vibrant research environment, and at the same time to allow for virtual participation to include researchers across the globe. It was to facilitate debates and exchange among the involved disciplines and projects, stimulate the multidirectional flows of empirical findings, ongoing discussions, refined methodologies, and conceptual advances. These flows were to irresistibly generate additional analytical value, thus establishing the Knowledge Lab as *the* vibrant intellectual environment for the development of transdisciplinary synergies.

To keep these promises and respective expectations, specific pathways were moulded. First and foremost, three forums were designed to structure and channel the activities.

The **Theory Forum** was conceived as the venue for joint theory building. Assembling all members of the Cluster and their various projects, abstract, yet empirically grounded theoretical debates were to take place here. The researchers would relate their projects to the general research agenda of *Africa Multiple* and operationalize the main theoretical concepts for their own projects in turn. Regular discussion of the four heuristic angles, spatialities, temporalities, medialities and modalities, were expected to animate debates across the different disciplines and projects. After the first two years devoted to deepening the main theoretical concepts, and the following years used to further explore the four angles, the final year could be used to review the output of the common work for the reconfiguration of African Studies.

In addition, the **Reflexive African Studies Forum** was designed to focus on the (self-)critical reconfiguration of African Studies. The Cluster's members could engage here in critical and systematic reflection of the terms and premises of academic knowledge production by including African colleagues into research and debates, by questioning positionalities grounded in localities and disciplines, by revising "Africa" as an area, by rethinking "Africa" as an analytic concept as well as by developing a research and publication ethics.

Thirdly, a separate **Methodology Forum** was designed. It was expected to become a laboratory for the honing of methodologies across disciplines. By comparing and juxtaposing various methodological approaches, this forum was designed to identify possibilities and limits of the methods in use, and to collect experiences with the usage of other methods in the projects. In the long run, these exchanges and debates would help to establish and cultivate transdisciplinary research, approaches, and methods that inform the Cluster-based reconfiguration of African Studies.

So much for the wishes. An ancient curse says: your wishes shall be fulfilled. If we look at what has been realized of this roadmap, some of the wishes came true, while others were revised or remained unfulfilled.

Starting with what has been implemented. Each semester, the Knowledge Lab had an overarching theme that informed the content of the *Theory Forum*. To pursue the foci and annual themes, the Cluster members engaged, amongst others, in reading texts, holding and discussing lectures, and in convening annual international conferences.

- *Summer Term 2019*: Focus on the research foci of the Research Sections and their relation to the core concepts of the Cluster, namely multiplicity, relationality, and reflexivity.
- *Winter Term 2019/20*: Focus on integration of Cluster groups and units.
- *Summer Term 2020*: Annual theme *Relationality*.
- *Winter Term 2020/21*: Annual theme *Modalities*.
- *Summer Term 2021*: Annual theme *Modalities*.
- *Winter Term 2021/22*: Annual theme, *Medialities*.
- *Summer Term 2022*: Annual theme *Medialities*.
- *Winter Term 2022/23*: Annual theme *Spatialities*.
- *Summer Term 2023*: Annual theme *Spatialities*.
- *Winter Term 24/25*: Annual theme *Temporalities*.
- *Summer Term 2025*: Annual theme *Temporalities*

Complementing the theory discussion in the central Knowledge Lab sessions, the bi-weekly meetings of the Research Sections (RS) “Affiliations,” “Arts and Aesthetics,” “Knowledges,” “Learning,” “Mobilities” and “Morality” also delved into these topics and respective theories. Over the course of time, these two levels, KL and RS, have become increasingly disconnected, due first to the Covid crisis, but also as a result of divergent theoretical interests among the growing number of members that could not be brought together under a common roof.

A number of high-level events were offered under the label of the *Reflexive African Studies Forum* every semester. These include the Intersectionality and Critical Diversity Literacy (ICDL) lectures, roundtables, and debates set up by the Gender and Diversity Office. They also include the seminar series that has been organized since summer semester 2022 by the Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South together with the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). In addition, individual discussion groups took up political and

societal topics connected to African Studies. Furthermore, project leaders and research sections organized “decentralized” workshops dealing with the reconfiguration of African Studies within disciplines.

The *Methodology Forum* was smaller in scope and size than the other fora. Seminars and workshops organized by the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) for doctoral candidates were more relevant in this field than any Knowledge Lab programme. It also seems that methodological questions were often dealt together with theory or reflexive topics. Finally, project methods could at best be discussed at the project level or at the level of the Research Sections. Nevertheless, some central Knowledge Lab events were assigned to the *Methodology Forum*, including the regular presentations on the *Digital Research Environment*. The following events were happening as part of the Methodology Forum:

- Winter Term 2019/20: Symposium Intersectionality: Theory, Approach, Activism; Data and Theoretical Perspectives on Colonial Letters.
- Winter Term 2020/21: Emancipatory Methodologies: Transdisciplinarity and Dialogues of Knowledges in Intercultural Contexts; How to conceptualize “the field” in reflexive.
- African Studies?; Fluid Ontologies – Dissolving the Known?
- Summer Term 2021: Round Table and Workshop with the Editors and Contributors
- BIGSASworks! Special Issue “Fieldwork Experiences and Practices in Africa”.
- Winter Term 2021/22: The WissKi Database.
- Summer Term 2023: State on Fluid Ontologies: Our path from data intake to semantic recommendations.

How did Cluster members and guests respond to the programme? Of course, there were many individual reactions; and yet, they can be clustered. These are some of the different types of Knowledge Lab participants that could be (jokingly) distinguished:

The Schlarauff (sits in his armchair and waits for the required piece of theory to be brought to him): “Hey, waiter! Where’s my tequila sunrise?”

The Silver Surfer (solitaire, board rider): “I don’t even live here. I’m on my way to my planet.”

The Sleeper / the E-Mailer (sits down to do something else): “I am multitasking,

well, what did you just say?"

The Subscriber: "Well, what's on the menu today? Am I actually hungry?"

The Educator: "I'd like to set up a working group with some of you on my topic."

The Flounder: "Okay, okay, I join in!"

The Chronically Ill (has misjudged the workload): "Sorry, I cannot come today. I have an urgent doctoral appointment."

The Constructive: "I have a suggestion!"

The Perfidious: "I have a suggestion for you!"

The Salvationist: "Stop! Turn back! You are in breach of the Cluster application!"

However, this initial period came to a sudden end with COVID-19. In response to the new working conditions resulting from the pandemic, Knowledge Lab meetings were completely shifted to digital communication formats. The forms of collaboration in the Cluster abruptly changed with the contact ban, as did the collaboration with international partners. From the summer semester of 2020 on, no more face-to-face meetings were held in Bayreuth. Since then, Knowledge Lab meetings have been held entirely as online Zoom events. The switch to online meetings means: no more meeting people in a real room, no more communicating through the nuances of physical expression, no more face-to-face conversations around the scheduled meetings. The participants of the digital Knowledge Lab communicated via a static screen with sometimes poor resolution, unstable connections, and shaky picture or sound, without eye contact.

The new daily routine takes its toll, and Zoom fatigue was noticeable for many participants after a while. But the change had positive consequences. The Cluster was forced to use existing technical facilities on a systematic basis, to develop suitable working formats for them, and to integrate both into the Cluster's everyday life. The online events of the Knowledge Lab were planned and prepared more intensively, moderator and discussant roles were assigned, and all steps and procedures were precisely coordinated. Above all, now all Cluster members, across all locations, met equally. In the new formats of digital sociability, Bayreuth and African Cluster Center (ACC) partners became closer, and the mutual exchange of content intensified considerably.

The switch to online and later hybrid sessions intensified the work in the Knowledge Lab for a while, and so did the gradual return to face-to-face contact. Hybrid meetings became the technical standard of Knowledge Lab meetings, Zoom fatigue disappeared. However, as the programme continued, the

long-term structural characteristics of the Knowledge Lab, both positive and negative, became apparent. They are briefly summarized together with an outlook on AM 2.0.

Even if not all expectations were met, the Knowledge Lab achieved a number of important benefits for the Cluster. It established a regular place at a fixed time for the central meetings of the members of *Africa Multiple*. It successfully interlinked African Cluster Centres, Bayreuth Academy, and Research Sections as it assembled in its weekly sessions a great (although fluctuating) number of Cluster members and high profile guests to engage in top-class debates and systematic reflection. It managed to connect scholars, artists and activists to encourage venturing and thinking outside one's boxes, thus stimulating trans-disciplinary synergies. To be specific: artists and activists held academic lectures or seminars in the Knowledge Lab, whereas they presented performances or artistic productions outside the Knowledge Lab at Iwalewahauss, Reichshof, Neuneinhalb, or Thurnau castle.

Who would deny that, over a couple of years, the Knowledge Lab of AMC 1.0 offered a vibrant international research environment? With the routine use of videoconferencing and hybrid sessions established during the Covid crisis, it now facilitates direct academic exchange among the five partner institutions of the Cluster and integrates international researchers across the globe.

Nevertheless, after a time, the central events had less appeal than was expected. Interest in theory and in exchange of ideas declined among the project teams after the conceptual work in the project was completed. As the Knowledge Lab did not offer conceptual debate only, but also provided a forum for subgroups of the Cluster, the programme quickly became overloaded. This led to justified complaints of "overheating". Limiting the programme to a small number of well prepared and output oriented keynote events can counter this problem in the future. However, as in AMC 1.0, the Knowledge Lab in AMC 2.0 will continue to provide *the* critical space to advance scholarly debates and insights concerning the major Cluster themes, theories, and methodologies. As the central venue for plenary events, the AMC 2.0 Knowledge Lab will, in particular, advance the joint theoretical work on world(s) and world-making, in line with the *Cluster Trinity* (i.e. the core concepts *Multiplicity-Relationality-Reflexivity*), to create synergies between the newly founded six Research Sections, namely "Accumulation," "Ecologies", "Digital Materialities," "In:Securities," "Re:Membering" and "Translation."

Apart from Knowledge Lab sessions, Cluster members may hold decentralized events that respond to the interests and needs of smaller groups. These

include the BIGSAS Colloquium, the ICDL lecture and roundtable series, and sessions convened by the Research Sections.

In AM 1.0, the Knowledge Lab has not been the place for discussing concepts, methods, and outcomes of individual research projects, as the number of projects was too big to be brought together at this level. In AM 2.0, research retreats will be organized as an additional format to fill this important gap.

Similarly, formats to support early career researchers in developing research skills, clarifying project-related issues, or training in academic writing and publishing did not find a suitable place in the Knowledge Lab. They were more suitably organized by the BIGSAS in the past, and similar events will also be offered by the BIGSAS or the Cluster International Career Centre (CLICC) in AM 2.0.

Despite attempts to involve the African Cluster Centers (ACCs) in the programme making, the Knowledge Lab of AM 1.0 still had a focus in Bayreuth based physical rooms, for conceptual and practical reasons. In parallel, the ACCs held their own colloquia and discussion panels. While this resulted in an extremely rich range of events and topics, it reinforced the overheating of the programme, whose parts run parallel and unconnected to each other. In AM 2.0, the Cluster will not only reduce the centrally organised events and leave the Research Sections more space for interdisciplinary work. Each Research Section and each Cluster location will also be represented in the planning committee for the annual programme. This will involve the African Hubs, now called Africa Multiple Research Centres (AMRC), to convene and mould the Knowledge Lab programme even more evenly, while the overlap of events organised at the five AMRCs can be avoided.

Final and key question: Which Cluster member has attended the most KL events? No formal proof, but there is a clear trend: the Vice-Dean of Research is in first place, followed by the Cluster Dean. However, as the Vice-Dean of Research is split between three people, Rüdiger Seesemann may have the edge here, and he may have asked the most questions. He therefore deserves the golden AM 1.0 Knowledge Lab pin.