

[un]disciplined encounters: science as terrain of postcolonial interaction between Africa and Europe – past and future

Brussels, 5-6 November, 2010

[Summary]

Looking at science as a terrain of postcolonial interaction between Africa and Europe adds a vital dimension to the many commemorative and celebratory events related to the fiftieth anniversary of seventeen African countries. The central question is if, how and to what extent scientists have been assessing their stances and interventions in connection with Africa in terms of decolonisation. The conference invites scholars to put their own positions to academic and public scrutiny and scrutinize the vicissitudes of science and scientists throughout the postcolonial period.

This general question is not the licence for a navel-gazing retrospective but the starting point of an open-minded combination of historical reconstruction and reflexive prognosis on science as site of collaboration and distinction, antagonism and complicity between Africa and Europe. Without for that matter essentialising either the colonial vs. the postcolonial, science vs. 'non-science', or Africa vs. Europe, this conference is a transgressive as much as an interdisciplinary endeavour which addresses the overall theme in three different registers: theoretical, institutional and thematic. In the thematic register, the conference investigates the role of science in processes of subjectification and objectification that take place in the domains of heritage, conflict and advocacy.

[Call for papers]

Looking at science as a terrain of postcolonial interaction between Africa and Europe adds a vital dimension to the many commemorative and celebratory events related to the fiftieth anniversary of seventeen African countries. Although scholars often play a large part in these events, as experts, eyewitnesses, activists, or otherwise, they rarely or marginally seize these occasions to put their own positions – the vicissitudes of science and scientists throughout the postcolonial period – to academic and public scrutiny.

One could object that such is perhaps easier done for the colonial period. After all, it is now widely acknowledged that scientific work – its practices and infrastructure as

much as its insights and findings – in many different disciplines, ranging from the humanities and social sciences, to geography and the life sciences, were vital for the *mise en valeur*, the exploitation of human and natural resources, of the African colonies. But much the same can be said of the postcolonial period although it is clear that science and scientists now operate in knowledge/power configurations that differ considerably from the colonial ones and that have been variously identified as developmentalism, neoliberal governmentality, therapeutic domination, etc.

But there are more (dis)continuities to reckon with in these matters. From the time when the mostly young African universities tried to turn their backs on the former metropolis through programmes of Africanisation until the present when the Bologna reforms or the World Bank's 'green' expertise are contested as undermining national scientific institutions and local expertise, the blame of 'colonisation' of knowledge/science, is never far away. The question is if, how and to what extent scientists themselves have been assessing their stances and interventions in connection with Africa in terms of decolonisation.

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1. Postcolonial science: beyond the many limits of Postcolonial Theory

The first register addresses questions of theory and method, ideologies and pedagogies – the kind of issues Postcolonial Theory has been dealing with for many decades. Although Post(-)colonial Theory (or more generally 'Postcolonial Studies') has been working hard towards destabilizing received geopolitical categories, interrogating Western (epistemic) hegemonies, and the affirmative recuperation of subaltern voices, it has been accused of being an intellectual *coterie* in several respects. This conference suggests several avenues of decolonizing science, by exploring postcolonial studies in 'multiple engagements':

- in other disciplines than the humanities and social sciences,
- in area studies (through the reinvention of African Studies),
- in disparate trajectories of intellectual decolonization within and without African & European academia.

2. Science in the postcolony: states, institutions, and networks.

The second register explores the past and future, the continuities and discontinuities of decolonizing science from three angles: states and state-building, institutions, and (national and international) networks (in the broad sense of the term).

- As far as state and state-building is concerned, the habitual concern is with the role that science, its institutions, its personnel and its expertise, have played in the building and reworking of the independent African states. Beyond that, science as a 'universal' authoritative discourse, network and institution, occupies a special place in the global knowledge economy and in transnational forms of governmentality.
- Universities, museums, and libraries were set up in Africa in the late colonial and early postcolonial period as the hallmarks of modernity and national intellectual sovereignty. Likewise, in Europe, in the wake of decolonisation, colonial institutes or institutes with a direct colonial mission were either abolished or redirected. Through case studies and comparative investigations, this conference wishes to look into postcolonial transformations of research and teaching institutes in Europe and Africa.
- Throughout the postcolonial period, national and international partnerships, informal networks and formal associations formed the human infrastructure in which the processes of scientific collaboration and distinction have been taking shape. This conference wishes to ask special attention for issues related to (field) research, funding, implementation and publication.

3. Objects and subjects: processes of objectification and subjectification in heritage, conflict, and advocacy

The third register looks into the role of science in postcolonial processes of objectivation/objectification and subjectivation/subjectification in three distinct domains: heritage, conflict, and advocacy.

- When looking at heritage, the main focus is on 'intangible heritage', more particularly on what has been classified under indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, endangered languages, etc. Here the conference wishes to look at processes of objectification (disciplining, commoditization, etc.) and concomitant processes of subjectification, such as identity-construction, cultural affirmation, etc. as well as on the role and changing position of scientists and science as an authoritative discourse.

- As far as conflict is concerned, the conference wishes to look into the relationship between conflict and scientific research: the way in which the cold war situation, repression and dictatorial regimes or political instability and 'new wars' affect, hamper or otherwise inspire and refashion scientific research in/on Africa?

Special attention is asked for the role of scholars, researchers and experts in the construction of testimonies of victims and/or perpetrators. Objectification of identity, religion, ethno-national belonging, etc. is entangled with processes of political subjectification through representation and 'traumatic' testimony.

- Finally, the conference wishes to raise the interrelated issues of advocacy and consultancy, activism and commercialisation of scientists and their work in Africa and Europe. In the aftermath of postcolonial and postmodernist critiques, the relationship between researcher and 'researched' has been reshaped in terms of mutual engagement, coevalness, dialogics and dialectics. In line with these sensitivities, the conference wishes to look into the popular, political and market forces scientists find themselves operating in both in the field and in their academic institutes and organisations.

[Paper submission]

The organising committee invites interested participants to submit proposals for inclusion in the conference programme. Submissions should include:

- Paper title
- Name(s) and affiliation(s) of paper proposer(s)
- A 250 word (maximum) abstract

Submissions should be made in pdf-format to secretariat@science2010-af-eu.com

The official conference languages are English and French.

The deadline for paper proposals is 31 August 2010

[Funding]

With the support of VLIR-UOS (University Cooperation for Development) and the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, the conference can offer funding for the participation of scholars from Africa or African scholars with institutional attachments on the continent. Further details will be available soon.

[Cultural Programme]

The cultural programme includes guided visits to relevant exhibitions, film screenings, and artistic interventions.

[General coordination]

Karel Arnaut (UGent)

[Scientific Committee]

Filip De Boeck (Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa, KULeuven), Koen Vlassenroot (Central Africa Programme (Egmont), Brussels), Sarah De Mul (Interuniversity Working Group on Congo, KULeuven), Bambi Ceuppens (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren), Pierre De Maret (Centre d'Anthropologie Culturelle, Institut de Sociologie, ULB), Marleen Temmerman (Ghent Africa Platform, UGent)

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[Labels]

AEGIS thematic conference; Belgian EU Presidency ; Annual Distinguished Lecture on Africa (Ghent Africa Platform)