

Konrad Czernichowski, Dominik Kopiński, Andrzej Polus
University of Wrocław, Poland

Polish African Studies at the crossroad: Past, Presence and Future

(Early draft)

Introduction

The fact that Africa consists of two macro-regions has its impact on the development of African Studies in Europe. North Africa was in the very heart of the Europeans' interests already in the ancient times (the name Africa was firstly used for the Roman province established on the ruins of Cartagena in 146 BC; only in 41 a Roman geographer, Titus Pomponius Mela, used a name "Africa" to describe the entire continent). Yet towards everything that is located below the Sahara desert the Europeans have long been indifferent. Sub-Saharan Africa seems far away, further than the very geographical distance would indicate.

Ohly (Afryka 2010, 133) distinguishes three periods of the development of African Studies:

- Afrocentrism – the main role played by missionaries who tried to adjust African languages for the purposes of Christianity, including the need of education; as a consequence Europeans created centres whose major research areas were languages and cultures;
- examining the whole continent to fulfil the cognitive role;
- educating Africanists who could undertake research on their own.

The beginnings of African Studies in Poland were difficult. Political studies on Africa today are carried out in several university centres. The most important would be:

- University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski);
- University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie);
- University of Wrocław (Uniwersytet Wrocławski).

Only the first one enables studying African Studies as a full-scale curriculum. However, it covers solely culture and languages of Africa (Suahili, Hausa and Amharic are taught). According to Jarosław Róžański, core subjects in standard African Studies should also be history and geography of Africa.

Whereas political science and African region indeed "meet" in the Polish academia quite rarely, the situation looks even more gloomy with regards to economics. There is literally a handful of economists in Poland who publish on Africa on regular basis, what, considering the sheer number of population in academia, may be puzzling. Interestingly enough, it has nothing to do with the path dependence or the tradition as this was quite strong in the 60s and 70s thanks to the names such as Egon Vielrose or Zofia Dobrska (the author of *Problemy gospodarcze Afryki*, UW, Studium Afrykanistyczne 1968).

The community of African Studies in Poland is extremely diversified and scattered. The level of integration is low although attempts are made to change this situation. In the years 2007 and 2010

two African Studies Congresses gathering scholars of various disciplines were organized.

On the history of African Studies in Poland...

The first Polish documented research expedition to Africa took place between 1882 and 1885 and it was conducted by S. Szolc-Rogoziński, L. Janikowski i K. Tomczek (Piłaszewicz and Rzewuski, 2004, 26). After the first world war Polish science begun re-establishing its foundations. The demand for more expertise on Africa was sparked by the establishing of the Maritime and Colonial League (Pol. *Liga Morska i Kolonialna*). Cracow and Warsaw became two major academic centers in Poland, and studies on Africa were conducted almost exclusively there. During the second world war the African Studies obviously did not advance. However, the presence of Polish soldiers in North Africa allowed for accumulation of knowledge concerning for example tropical medicine or climate.

The research during the interwar period were dominated by linguistic studies, and the works of Roman Stopa, who was a world class specialist in languages with clicks are worth mentioning here. The most famous Polish anthropologist – Bronisław Malinowski (whose major research area was Trobriand Islands) – came to East Africa in 1934 and conducted field research with his students, and formulated the theory of cultural contract (Malinowski 1976)¹. In the interwar period a strong political lobby for overseas possessions and colonies emerged in Poland - The League wanted to educate society about naval issues and prepare specialist in the field of tropical medicine and farming who will facilitate Polish settles in the colonies (the League wanted to take over German possessions in Africa), from the other hand League perceived colonies as a possible solution to the problem of unemployment and overpopulation of Poland. Because of the Maritime and Colonial League pressure and successful lobbying the colonial studies emerged at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and University of Warsaw (Kuczyński 1994, 144-145), as well as the Polish government demands for overseas territories in the League of Nations.

Generally speaking, the studies of African politics and economy were established as a separate discipline in the Western states in the 1950's when the African nationalism emerged; with independence achieved, analytical scope shifted to the political developments of the newly independent states (International... 2001, 255-256). In Poland research in those fields became established in the 1960s. Soviets became more active in the Middle East and later in Africa after Stalin's death. The policy towards Africa received an extra impetus with the advent of decolonisation.

University of Warsaw became the major place where African studies were being developed, and in 1962 the Centre of African Studies came into being there (Halpern 1965, 430). In the late 1960s the largest number of enrolled students were in the department of economics, and some studies of economic development of various African states were produced (a particular field of research was Western Africa – especially Nigeria and Ghana). The department of philosophy and

¹ Bronisław Malinowski served as a mentor to Jomo Kenyatta (the first Prime Minister and President of independent Kenya), he even wrote an introduction to Kenyatta's book about his own tribe – one of the first books about Africa written by Africans, J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu. With Introduction by B. Malinowski*, Vintage Books, New York 1965, pp. vii – xiii.

sociology organized seminars on nation-building in modern African states and on modernization and African concept of socialism (African... 1967, 270). Simultaneously the M.A. program in African languages was developed in the Institute of Oriental Studies. The other research activities included: geography of Africa, cultural anthropology and history of Africa. The Centre of African Studies was transformed in the late 1970s into the African Institute, and afterwards it changed the name to the Institute of Developing Countries and started the research and teaching programmes dedicated to all developing states. It was very active in providing expertise and training, including language courses, both for diplomats, journalists and experts being sent to Africa (the departure was conditional on passing the exam). The institute published a high volume of books and other works (green and yellow series) on various issues, ranging from economy to tropical agriculture.

The relative popularity of African Studies in the 1960s and 1970s might be partly explained by the Cold War realities. In the Cold War era, the creation of research institutes devoted to the African and Oriental studies, reflected “the Soviet Union’s sharply increased interest in the Afro-Asian world at the time, as a result of Soviet policymakers’ needs for research in the countries of the contemporary East and Africa” (Naumkin 2004, IX). Moreover, the 1960s and 1970s were the period when African issues became simply fashionable in Poland. The number of popular books and TV productions about Africa significantly increased (Kuczyński 1994, 151) and Polish universities launched exchange programmes with African universities. This period was also marked by an increase in field research conducted by Polish scholars in Africa. The next decade was dominated by political turmoil in Poland as in 1981 martial law was introduced and the state was governed by the Military Council for National Salvation. In the eighties African studies in Poland, due to an economic and political meltdown, have witnessed a gradual depletion in terms of the number of scholars and practitioners.

According to a prominent Polish africanist African Studies were essentially free from socialist indoctrination. The courses were run by experts in their respective fields not by political officers. In fact African Studies had a reputation of an asylum for all those who wanted to pursue scientific research without Marxist straightjacket. The level of autonomy was significant, which does not mean that the scholarly work was completely outside of the control of the Communist party (nothing was – at the end of the day it was a totalitarian system). The early books of Kapuściński show, however, that critical stance towards African varieties of socialism was permissible and tolerated, contrary to criticising socialist countries in Europe which adopted the communist ideology. The latter was out of question. Many books published by africanists in that period were far from praising Marxism, in fact some even attempted to convey thesis being rather heretical. This can be at least partly attributed to a relatively little political weight of African region for the Polish Communist Party.

In 1989 the political transition officially started in Poland when “Solidarity” Movement was legalized and communist government allowed it to participate partly in a semi-free parliamentary elections. The transition period was not only marked by radical economic reforms, political pluralism and strategic reorientations in foreign policy, but also by the need of research programme adjustments to new circumstances. The Leninism and Marxism were removed from the research programmes, and we can observe the increased interest in the European studies, as Poland started a bid for membership in the European Union. The African studies in the fields of archeology, ethnography and cultural anthropology seem to be best developed in Poland. High

numbers of students in the departments of economy and political science did not facilitated developments in these very study areas. Paradoxically, the diagnosis of Polish African studies presented almost 50 years ago by Jan Halpern seems to be appropriate also today – “generally speaking, Polish scholars in African subjects feel that the further progress of their work demands, above all, a better co-ordination of research and closer contacts with specialist abroad” (Halpern 1965, 432).

In recent years, one can observe the process of African studies developments outside Warsaw. Cyclical Africanist conferences are held by smaller universities, such as University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn or Szczecin University. One may even venture to say that Africa became ‘fashionable’ research subject among Polish students, as the number of MA thesis devoted to Africa rises. Nevertheless there is a lack of an umbrella organisation that could gather majority of academics who study Africa. The very feature of Polish African studies is fragmentation. In simple terms one can say, that there is one person who is doing African studies in every Polish university, but it is rarely his/her major field of interest. Some people do the African studies as the second or third research area, and occasionally publish a paper devoted to a current development on the continent.

On the role of African Studies...

The discussion about the achievements and condition of African Studies in Poland was begun by two Polish Africanists: Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko (1933-2009) and Prof. Rajmund Ohly (1928-2003) in the mid-1990s. On many occasions during the debate the scholars raised concerns about a social usefulness of their work. What may be the role of African Studies in the country whose ties with the continent – both historical and present – are of negligible importance? What is the driving force that made a significant number of scholars dedicate their academic (and often private) life to studying African continent? In the debate that has been underway in the official bulletin of Polish African Studies Association, Niećko formulates three principal roles of African Studies (Afryka 1995, 10-13). The first one, cognitive or in simple terms the “urge to know”, clearly stands out as a chief objective. The outcome of this intellectual pursuit is difficult to establish a priori, nonetheless the cognitive motive, being the major driving force of African studies in Poland, particularly in the past, occupies a special place. The other *raison d’etre* of African Studies is awareness rising and dissemination of knowledge about the continent and its people. This would entail also debunking myths and stereotypes that surround Africa in the Polish society and heavily distort the image of the continent. Lastly, the third role is linked to self-development. Niećko argues that while trying to understand others, we may actually have a better understanding of ourselves. What is particularly interesting, yet at the same time may reveal a bitter truth about the Polish African Studies (see below), is that the debate has rarely touched upon a pure utilitarian motive. This is rightly noted by Waliński (Afryka 2010, 144) who laments that African Studies in Poland lacks an utilitarian touch which is for example so pronounced in American Studies. It may be argued that the African Studies community that has not recognized or was not genuinely interested in actively advancing the practical angle of the discipline (the period of the 60s and 70s described above where African studies were thriving is certainly an exception but it happened mostly in response to the international events, namely decolonization). To Waliński scholars have to take the responsibility for the way the African Studies evolves, also in the name of their own strategic interest. As long as African Studies are confined to studying

languages, culture or a anthropology it is very unlikely that the demand for their knowledge and expertise significantly grows within one's lifetime. It may be assumed that the demand for African Studies needs to be created and this can be accomplished by a concerted effort of the whole community that has to wake up the Polish political class to the fact that Africa can no longer be solely seen as an object of charity or tourist destination. The growing engagement in Africa or other developing countries, such as China, India or even Turkey shows that the entirely new process is unfolding on our watch. Obviously, the efforts of awareness rising have to be complemented at the grass-root level, namely in the public opinion, without whom the real political change is bound to fail.

Elsewhere, Milewski notes that the roles of African Studies are not written in stone and their formulation depends on the perspective, therefore implying that the motives pointed by Niećko are just one possible reading of the role of African Studies in Poland. The first role, according to Milewski, is "satisfying needs of those who wish to take on African Studies". The second one pertains to providing reliable information and knowledge about the current events taking place in Africa. The third role is the most pragmatic one. The African Studies scholars should play an advisory role in the policy making arena. They should also serve as an information support for non-governmental organizations engaged in Africa. Having said that, the third and the second role have certain overlapping areas and are mutually reinforcing.

On the substance of African Studies...

There are two competing interpretations of the substance of African Studies in Poland. The first, rather narrow reading, which is often attributed to scholars representing linguistic and cultural studies (often called "core" Africanists), regards African Studies as a fully autonomous field, discipline in its own right (Afryka 2010, 134). It assumes that African region is absolutely unique and its local context requires methodological tools tailored specifically for its non-replicable features. The other "camp" perceives African Studies merely as an area studies similar to European or Asian Studies. There is nothing particularly exceptional about how the research is handled, except the geographical focus which is clearly different. For Vorbrich to be Africanist one has to be in the first place an ethnologist, economist, anthropologist etc. This is actually how African Studies have been carried out for years in the vast majority of universities and research institutions in Poland. Milewski argues that due to the formal procedures followed in Polish academia with regards to obtaining scientific titles (e.g. PhD in economics, political science etc.), the latter definition of African Studies will be most likely more relevant in the years to come as it better suits the academic reality. Establishing the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Warsaw University in 2009 may spark some discussion in the opposite direction, but again changes are unlikely.

Using an exclusive name of "Afykanistyka" in a narrow sense, namely in relation to linguistic studies, which nonetheless implicitly suggests "being a specialist in Africa" is challenged by Milewski (Afryka 2010, 136-137) who argues that considering over 2000 African languages it's difficult to reconcile linguistic specialization (which is reduced to several languages at the utmost) with a broader perspective and understanding of Africa as a whole. In the same vain, Tymowski for example warns against too narrow specialisation within African Studies and seems to suggest that using the term Afrykanistyka should be at least to some extent conditional upon the scope of

the academic research (Afryka 2010, 139). Taking this argument further one can ask whether it is legitimate to call an Africanist a scholar with an extremely narrow specialisation (e.g. doing research on one African tribe). It should also be noted that whereas African Studies work as a common denominator and a type of “area” platform where different scholars doing research on Africa can share their findings, it does not necessarily lead to integration within the community and better communication. For example an ethnologist studying Tswana tribes’ rituals and economist investigating the central banking in Botswana are as distant to each other as a historian studying the culture of Kaszuby (geographical region in Poland) and econometrician working for the Polish central bank.

Whereas this is understandable in the academia, the widely held perception is that Africanist stands from being an expert on Africa. Szupejko cites Father J. Pawlik, who laments that being Africanist makes him exposed to all sorts of questions that go far beyond his specialisation and leave him puzzled (Afryka 2010, 138). This can be compared to expecting from a representative of European Studies and specialist, say, in French revolution to make a comment on the fall of ancient Rome. Pawlik rather argues that within each discipline there should be a room for Africa (“what kind of historian is a scholar whose knowledge is confined to the ancient Egypt”).

The narrow vision of African Studies, namely linguistic and cultural studies, and its still strong position in Poland can be at least to some extent explained by the historical context. After the second world war scholars willing to embark on the African Studies were seriously handicapped with regards to funding their research, field studies or more generally studying African reality on the ground contrary to desk research. In the early days of communist regime studying foreign languages which basically required access to written texts was for financially starved academics considered more feasible than for example studying tropical agriculture. This thesis can be backed by the example of Professor Niećko, a specialist in Ethiopian languages, who, as Vorbrich superbly recounts (Afryka 2010, 135) made her first trip to Ethiopia only after having obtained the academic title, “habilitacja” (interestingly enough, Ethiopian studies started in Poland in the 50s by Professor Strelcyn who expelled from France, was initially not a part of the African Studies but Semitic Studies). This type of academic path, namely being a renowned specialist in a geographical area without actually having visited the place, would be close to impossible for many other disciplines.

On the popularization role and related obstacles...

Popularization of Africa in Poland is faced with many barriers. The problem has its roots in how the educational system is designed and teaching history executed in schools. Tymowski (Afryka 2010, 139) points that in the XXI century in Poland children in the classroom are still taught that Africa has actually no history. In the most commonly used textbooks Africa in a chronological order appears for the first time in the context of ancient civilisations (Egypt, Rome) to reappear only in the time of colonisation, again described rather as a context of the Europeans’ activity. It is if between those two moments in time Africa had not existed. The problem is systemic and goes beyond knowledge conveyed to the students in school. As Tymowski notes in the recent edition of *Historia Powszechna* (ang. *General History*) the history of Africa is almost completely absent. In his opinion Poland, despite economic development, has significantly regressed in terms of knowledge about Africa, and more regrettably this can be also observed among the intellectual

elites. On the level of secondary schools there is a lack of books on Africa at school libraries, especially in small towns, and once it even happened that a book about Africa for children had a tiger living only in Asia in its cover. Popularization of Africa in Polish society is also the task for media. (Afryka 2010, 142-145).

On the link between the weakness of African Studies and foreign policy...

A relatively weak position of African Studies, understood both in a narrow sense and as area studies (measured by the relative number of publications), can be at least to some degree traced back to foreign policy of the Polish government. The political and economic significance of the African continent has been marginal at least since the eighties when Poland succumbed to a crisis that eventually became a historical turning point a few years later resulting in the regime change. Today Africa is virtually non-existent in the Polish foreign policy. Judging by the content of the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the “Afryka” bookmark, policy towards Africa has not much to offer. The accession to the European Union imposed certain obligations on the part of the Polish government to rejuvenate its engagement with the African continent, for example in the area of development assistance (according to the European Consensus on Development signed also by Poland in 2005, 50% of new aid allocations should be earmarked for Africa). It also prompted the government to adopt its first since the fall of communism strategy documents covering relations with the continent. Nevertheless, these top-down attempts of the Europeanization have not been wildly successful. On the contrary, Polish cooperation with Africa has continued to be at the standstill despite signals that the government has actually a will to move things forward. This particularly refers to the meeting held in the MOF in 2008 where possibilities of tightening cooperation with African region within a new EU-Africa framework were discussed with experts and academics (Afryka 2010, 145). Regrettably, to the authors’ knowledge, it has not been furthered in any way which again proves that policy towards Africa is nothing but illusion. A quite symptomatic can also be a lack of Polish contribution to the eight thematic groups adopted under the Joint EU-Africa strategy in 2007 and a decision to shut down four embassies on the continent in the name of trimming down costs in the foreign policy budget. The latter move has been explained as a part of a new strategy of setting up a new model of diplomatic outposts reduced to regional hubs. Nevertheless, given the swiftness of the operation and an astonishment of the experts it is difficult to believe that this was indeed a part of the plan.

Poland enjoyed a good reputation in many African countries in the bipolar world during the cold war. There is a great deal of Africans who studied in Poland among political elites. The most well-known are: Prof. Alpha Oumar Konaré (former chairman of the African Union), Libertine Amathila (Deputy Prime Minister of Namibia) and Nassoro Wachilowa Malocho (former minister of state for planning in President’s Office in Tanzania). At this stage, it can still capitalise on the past experience and former personal contacts but this conducive environment will not last forever. If the government does not act now, the cooperation with Africa, if ever resumed, will have to start from scratch.

The current developments

Currently we can observe a gradual increase of interest in Africa in both Polish society and

among students. In the Institute of International Studies of the University of Wrocław the number of M.A. thesis devoted to Africa is rising every year. Another important trend is the development and rise of various students' associations working on African affairs². Another phenomenon that is worth mentioning here is the African Films Festival "AfryKamera" organized annually since 2006 in Poland (www.afrykamera.pl). AfryKamera is the only film festival exclusively dedicated to the African cinema in Central and Eastern Europe.

In 2010 a group of academics from the University of Wrocław established Polish Center for African Studies (PCSA – www.pcsa.org.pl). The Center is the first independent, non-governmental organisation in Poland and Central Europe devoted exclusively to the study of contemporary Africa. The main goal of the Centre is to carry out rigorous academic research and produce relevant policy analysis with regards to Africa, mostly in the fields of Economics, International Relations and Political Science. In producing such analysis, the PCSA aims to contribute to the revitalization and deepening of economic and political relations between Central Europe and Africa. One of the core ideas that prompted the set-up of PCSA was to enhance integration and cooperation of Polish academics representing the field of African studies. The Centre is planning to build a database of Polish academics who work in the field of African studies.

On the future of African Studies in Poland...

According Nina Pawlak, there is a great need of integrating Africanists doing research in different areas. There are at least two forms of such integration:

- creating African Studies as a universal field of study;
- creating inter-disciplinary teams of researchers and obtaining grants.

As for now, African Studies have had a lot of experience in working out methodology. However, it requires time for integrating different disciplines connected with African Studies. For example, the first African Studies Congress for linguists took place in 1997 – 100 years after inaugurating research in this field in Europe and in the world. African Studies in Poland are in a similar situation now – the First African Studies Congress in Poland was held in Pieniężno in 2007. It revealed that there are a lot of scientists undertaking African Studies from different perspectives.

African Studies in many Western countries are driven by market and job opportunities, not compassion or even aforementioned "urge to know". This change of mentality is also needed in Poland.

Sources

1. *African Studies in Poland*, "Journal of Modern African Studies", September 1967, Vol. 5,

² One of the most active students associations is Society for African Affairs at the Jagiellonian University. From 2007 Society for African Affairs organizes African Festival in Cracow, which is an educational and cultural event. <http://www.festiwalafrykanski.com> (visited: 28.05.2011); In 2004 the interdepartmental students' African Society was settled up at the University of Warsaw, <http://www.mkauw.ovh.org> (visited: 28.05.2011); The student's African Association is under creation at the University of Wrocław.

- No. 2.
2. *Afrykanistyka dzisiaj. Pożytki z interdyscyplinarności*, [in:] „Afryka” 2010.
 3. Halpern J., *Center of African Studies, University of Warsaw*, “Journal of Modern African Studies”, October 1995, Vol. 3, No. 3.
 4. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 1, ed. N.J. Smelser, P.B. Baltes, Elsevier 2001.
 5. Kenyatta J., *Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu. With Introduction by B. Malinowski*, Vintage Books, New York 1965.
 6. Kuczyński A., *Korzenie i współczesność polskich badań etnologicznych w Afryce*, „Etnografia Polska” 1994, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1 -2.
 7. Malinowski B., *The Dynamics of Culture Change: An Inquiry into Race Relations in Africa*, Greenwood Press Reprint, Westport 1976.
 8. Mantel-Niećko J., *Jaka dziś powinna być rola afrykanistyki?*, [in:] „Afryka” 1995.
 9. Naumkin V., *Preface*, in: „Russian Oriental Studies. Current Research on Past & Present Asian and African Societies”, ed. V. Naumkin, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2004.
 10. Piłaszewicz S., Rzewuski E., *Wstęp do afrykanistyki*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2004.