

Blurring and Resurrecting Boundaries: A Qualitative Approach to Social Transformation

Stephan Duennwald¹

¹CEA-ISCTE-Lisbon University Institute, Centro de Estudos Africanos, Lisbon, Portugal

stephan.dunnwald@iscte.pt

In the study of social change in African societies we are often confronted with two main features: change is either seen as positive in the sense of development, or negative in the sense of lacking development, and quantitative measures are favoured to measure these changes.

Anthropological and qualitative approaches, often rather small scale field- or case studies, have difficulties to come to generalised results. But, on the other hand, anthropological methods can trace meanings and interrelated transformations on the local and trans-local level, thus proving thick material that can be supplemented by and is necessary for the interpretation of the often thin quantitative data available to generalise findings.

A specific interest lies on the impact of external influences on African societies. It is not possible to draw a clear distinction between the “external” and “internal”, and the focus of research lies not on such a distinction, but on what happens within the interfaces of the global and the local. Talking about the interrelated internal and external influences, we also have to discuss the roles of actors and the significance of changing structures, and we have to take different types of velocity and extension into account.

For qualitative research of social change the proposed methodological approach is to identify places where specific emanations of social transformations can be identified and traced. A set of researches at and about such places can form a basis for comparative and/or cumulative interpretive data. The paper presents preliminary results from field research on migration and discusses its significance within the study of global exchange and its impact on African societies.