

The Order(ing) of Knowledge: Epistemology of Studies of Health, Culture and Education in Africa/ (in)discipline de la Connaissance : Epistémologie des recherches sur l’Afrique

Panel D23 Africa Knows! Conference on 26 February 2021

Initiated by:

The Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso  
AMCE University of Bayreuth, Germany

Our statement for this panel was the following: the African colonial context provides fertile ground for knowledge of the continent. Politically, anti-colonialists have played a major role in enhancing African identity through negritude. Historians has also worked on it while revealing the real motivations of the Western conquest of Africa. Unfortunately, it is rather the archives of pro-colonialist scholars that are the most widespread to the point of dominating those of anti-imperialists. However, they suggest new avenues of scientific research such as human health and pathology. One wonders how tormentors of Africa can become its benefactors? How did this cultural denial shape Africa? While regional historiographies are hardly enriched by those of colonial countries such as France, how can the question of growing capitalism fertilize regional research and problematize the epistemological status of colonialist archives? This panel offers critical reflections on the historical transmutations of African societies in relation to regional disciplines in health, culture, education, etc.

The panel is conveyed by:

Marieke van Winden (conference organiser) (African Studies Centre Leiden)  
Natéwindé Sawadogo (University of Thomas SANKARA)  
Rüdiger Seesemann (University of Bayreuth)  
Yacouba Banhoro (University Joseph Ki-Zerbo)

Schedule for 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021, the panel recorded six effective participants:

Marieke van Winden (conference organiser) (African Studies Centre Leiden)  
Natéwindé Sawadogo (University of Thomas SANKARA)  
Rüdiger Seesemann (University of Bayreuth)  
Yacouba Banhoro (University Joseph Ki-Zerbo)  
Laure Carbonnel (IHA CREPOS Dakar)

From a total of four submitted abstracts, two were actually presented. The first presentation was “Private medical practice in Western Africa Before 1900”, by Dr Natéwindé Sawadogo from the University of Thomas SANKARA, and member of the Africa Multiple Centre of the University of Joseph Ki-Zerbo, in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). For Dr Sawadogo, in France, the movement for the occupational control of labour of professionalism in the area of health began in early nineteenth century, and was authorized around the end of the same century. This process could not ignore medical practice outside France, from the time of overseas territories up to the colonial occupation at the end of the nineteenth century. It is known from travellers’ accounts, the literature on the French empire as well as from some incidental mentions in historical accounts on the development of health system in French overseas, that private practice initiated French medicine in overseas and that it was lucrative. It also known that competition between different occupational groups for status in the area of health was

fierce in France until the end of the nineteenth century, and even beyond. Surprisingly, archives on private medical practice in the colonies are virtually unavailable. This paper sets out to examine the situation of private medical practice in French African overseas at the end of the nineteenth century, when African territories fell under French colonial domination. This understanding is relevant for a better appreciation of the development of the practice during the following half a century of colonial occupation, and even beyond. So far African medical historians have tended to focus their interest on the colonial state organised medicine. Investigating privately organised practice can shed new light on the official account of French colonial medical assistance in its colonies of Africa.

Questions:

**Banhoro Yacouba:** the issue of colonial medicine has been present over time in the historical studies. What is this paper pointing in particular?

**Natéwindé Sawadogo:** the paper is concerned with two main issues that has been rarely addressed in the historical studies you are talking about. First, the issue of private medical practice has been mostly studied by English speaking Africa; to our knowledge, there is no single study on private medical practice in French speaking countries about colonial private medical practice in French colonies. Second, the issue is methodological. To the extent that the broader study of profession has been of less concern by French speaking countries, very few scholars even asked the question.

The second presentation was by Laure Carbonnel (IHA CREPOS Dakar) For Laure, cultural policy was at the core of the decolonisation process, but it was at the same time based on western bureaucratic conceptions of culture. This situation may question any efforts of scientific deconstruction of these hegemonic categories. The domain of culture, in which anthropological research is engaged (among other subjects), adds another layer of complexity, because it blurs boundaries between science, politics, entrepreneurship and sovereignty. In this presentation, I propose to move the debate outside of colonial or domination relationships, to consider more broadly the process of categorisation and of the production of science. On the one hand, the bases of anthropology as a scientific discipline fit perfectly with some decolonisation of science programs from the point of view of the categorisation process: to avoid ethnocentrism, seize sensitivities towards the world, be aware of the language, the situations, the relationships. Ethnology is also a way of challenging conceptions: of relationships to the non-human, of kinship relationships, of economy, politics and so on. On the other hand, as a science that is socially and historically produced, anthropology conveys some of the conceptions and positions from the time of colonisation and the industrialisation period. Instead of opposing a "western" and "African" conceptions, I will rather question the relationships between academic and other systems of knowledge in any country.

This was an exciting presentation, but the bad connection did not allow further discussion.

*This panel shed light on two key issues relevant to the knowledge of Africa:*

1. The lack of social studies that divert from the orthodoxy: indeed, needless to say, there was not only one discourse on Africa during the colonial times. There colonial imperial discourse was counteracted by colonized leaders who supported different and often opposing discourse on the place of colonization on African progress. These voices have not been used to inquiry systematically into the colonial enterprise. The French discourse on health in the colonial was that of humanitarian action, consisting in free delivery of

health care services. Dr Sawadogo's presentation showed that it was the whole picture and that there still many interesting questions to explore.

2. The second interesting issue is regarding the place of theory and world social science on the knowledge of Africa. We can know more Africa not only but asking distinctive questions about African societies, but also asking similar questions social scientists have asked about their societies elsewhere and notably in western societies. The struggle for freedom is not limited to the colonial situation, but also was part of Western history; because, the social structure that was set up in the colonies existed first in the metropolis and scholars asked interesting questions that could be illuminating for African studies.

In sum, knowledge, scientific knowledge is a collective enterprise that does not know boundaries. The reconfiguration of African studies, can benefit from inquiring into neglected strand of thought supported by African colonial leaders as by the dominated part of western societies.