

Panel C15: Challenges of African Studies in Central and Eastern Europe (initiated by CAAS, Czech Republic).

Convenors:

- Marieke van Winden (Conference Organiser) (African Studies Centre, Leiden).
- Hana Horakova (Metropolitan University Prague).
- Stephanie Rudwick (University of Hradec Králové).

Discussants

- Vít Zdralek (Charles University, Prague).
- Alžběta Šváblová (BIGSAS University Bayreuth).
- Tatiana Gavristova (Yaroslav Demidov State University).
- Nadezhda Khokholkova (Russian Academy of Sciences).
- Adeolu Oyekan (Nelson Mandela University).

Against the background focus of African Studies in the Czech Republic, Panel C15 examines more generally multidisciplinary challenges faced by African Studies scholars in Central/Eastern Europe.

Postcommunism, the African ‘outside’, and ‘the denial of coevalness’: the situation of African Studies in the Czech Republic.

Author: Vít Zdralek (Historian, Assistant in the Institute of Musicology, Faculty of Arts - Charles University, Prague).

According to the paper, the majority of Czech society perceive Africa as an epistemological and experiential outside; and Africans as irrelevant – inhabiting another time-space. The author uses the concept of ‘coevalness’ to ponder the responsibility to respond and to re-think the underlying economic, moral and political challenges of African Studies; pointing out the need of (re)inclusion of African Studies in Charles University Prague and urging to, more generally, decolonize Czech academic epistemology. A lively discussion about the status quo of scholarship on Africa in the Czech Republic followed the presentation and the question arose how much collaboration there is between the Czech and African institutions and scholars.

African Studies in the Czech Republic: Reflection on Early Career Researchers on Early Career Researchers.

Author: Alžbeta Šváblová (BIGSAS, University Bayreuth)

In this paper, Šváblová notes that African Studies is only regaining its ground in academic fields recently in the Czech Republic and faces complex challenges including funding, heavy teaching and administrative loads, relevance issues and more. Addressing these root challenges could transform the discipline. The paper focuses on the generation of new career researchers and analyses structural conditions surrounding their challenges and professional choices.

Postcolonial Geopolitics of Knowledge in the Context of African Studies

Authors: Tatiana Gavristova (Yaroslav Demidov State University) and Nadezhda Khokholkova (The Institute of African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences).

Gavristova and Khokholkova argues that the 'colonial library' spread by writers, adventurers (missionaries) and colonial officers; interested in creating 'an image of Africa' changed overtime yet, is characterised by cliches transformed in stereotypes such as wild, backward periphery void of knowledge, production, history and culture. Changes in postcolonial 'discursive formats' have attracted many African intellectuals into research, bringing them to the limelight of world science and humanities (including metanarratives on Africa and African Diaspora, Afropolitanism, 'necropolitics', postcolony, etc.). Some of their works have inspired a 'cyberattack' on stereotypes, Eurocentric systems of knowledge – suggesting strategic fairness in partnerships and opening portals of the 'postcolonial library.'

Gender Discourse in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Philosophy: A Cross-cultural Exploration

Author: Adeolu Oyekan (Nelson Mandela University).

In this paper, Adeolu contends that Eastern and Central Europe are seemingly a victim of Europe's cultural reductionism, based on the attention directed towards Southern and Western Europe as representative of European culture and scholarship in African Philosophy. Similarly, European scholarship is deemed responsible for orchestrating the historical and imperialist context of blanket inferiority in Africa's regard – as non-literate, monolithic and barbaric. Europe's counter-hegemonic decolonial scholarship also ignores the diversity and plurality of European history, culture and scholarship thereby, limiting the most needed cross-cultural, collaborative and

reflexive scholarship between Africa and Europe – key ingredient for decolonizing and decentring knowledge for mutual benefits.

The paper uses gender discourse to argue for intercontinental multiplicity of knowledge through prospects for collaborative scholarship between Eastern Europe and Africa. It also examines gender rights in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern European cultures as a fertile ground for cross-cultural knowledge that could stimulate the re-imagination of Western notions/conceptions of gender as a universal principle. The author posit that Eastern Europe and Africa (both victims of epistemic and cultural subjugation) face the burden of moving from the periphery to the centre in order to reclaim their epistemic agency.

Some key discussion points from the panel discussions

The Czech Republic has a long history of colonial imagination without colonies; with Africa becoming a metaphor of an ‘outside, distant place’ in space and time. A deeper examination of what, why and how of African Studies in Czech Republic exposes daunting questions about Africa ‘outside’ and the need for ‘coevalness.’

At the University of Hradec Králové, the only Czech university which currently offers a degree in African Studies, the Philosophical Faculty is in the process of creating an interdisciplinary programme which also allows for a broader scale of African Studies and hopefully more international and African students. There is no doubt that early career researchers in African Studies face multiple problems related to funding, international exposure, gender discrimination, and general academic marginalisation. African Studies in Eastern Europe could be rendered more attractive and rewarding through increased competitiveness, international publications, participation in conferences, building networks, interdisciplinarity and increasing success rates of third part funding.

Gavristova and Khokholkova examined the concept of ‘Postcolonial Library’ which provides a new perspective to postcolonial geopolitics of knowledge by generating a narrative space where the past and present are reconstructed. As Tatiana Gavristova pointed out ‘Belonging to an intellectual community does not depend on race.’ Eastern Europe and Africa share voices from the periphery albeit in different ways. How can these voices be heard and critically discussed? More collaboration between Central/Eastern European and African scholars is necessary. The question arises as in how far African Studies in the Czech Republic has shed away from economics and from connecting with businesses to engage in research. How can economic connections in Africa be increasingly a fabric of African Studies in the region? And yet more daring regarding the economic

relationship between Eastern Europe and Africa: the export of weapons. How do African Studies Centres in Eastern Europe relate to the weapons industry?

Further, it was pointed out that there have been quite a number of Africans who studied in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1990. It is suggested that these previous relationships could be 'anchoring points' for Czech/Russian/ African relationships/partnerships?

Some references to previous scholarship was provided:

Příběh zapomenuté univerzity. Universita 17. listopadu (1961–1974) a její místo v československém vzdělávacím systému a společnosti. [The story of a forgotten university: 17 November University (1961-1974) and its place the Czechoslovak educational system and society.] Also, there is a book on African students doing film studies in Czechoslovakia. that is bilingual: *Filmaři všech zemí, spojte se! / Filmmakers of the World, Unite!/: Zapomenutý internacionalismus a československý film a třetí svět /* Forgotten Internationalism, Czechoslovak Film and the Third World. Also, the recent book *Černí sokoli* (Black Falcons) by Kateřina Mildnerová depicts the fates of the so-called Namibian kids who grew up in 1970s Czechoslovakia. Its English version was published by LIT Verlag under the title *Namibian Czechs. History and identity of the Namibian children raised in Czechoslovakia* (2020). The works by Miroslav Zikmund and Jiří Hanzelka were mentioned as pioneering. Panellists also discussed the important role of making African thinkers visible in African studies in Central and Easter Europe. There have to be 'strategies' in teaching to encourage students to read original African authors and use their ideas in their written output.

It was also mentioned that the Czech Scopus journal *Modern Africa, Politics History and Society* (<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa/index.php/ModAfr/index>) is planning a Special Issue on the Politics of Publishing on Africa with contributions that are co-authored between scholars located in Central/ Eastern Europe and scholars on the African continent.

Last, the COVID-19 challenges were discussed, and the problematic travelling situation lamented. For field research, anthropological scholars and ethnographers, this poses great difficulties. On the other hand, we discover that it is possible to do teaching, workshops, and conferences online and that interconnectedness between Africa and Europe is still feasible.