



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

The 7th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), University of Basel, Switzerland

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Recommended citation:

Skalník, P. (2018). The 7th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), University of Basel, Switzerland. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 5(2), 151–155. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v5i2.200>



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The most important Africanist conference in Europe, a biennial AEGIS event, took place for the 7th time in 2017. The main 3-day programme ran between 29 June and 1 July but pre-conference and post-conference activities such as special meetings, art and culture programmes, film screenings altogether made up almost a week. The main venue was the *Kollegienhaus* in Basel, which is the main building of the university. However, the academic programme took place in five other venues in the vicinity, while the art and culture events, conference dinner and innovative farewell brunch were scattered around the city. Thus, Basel as a whole lived with and for Africa for a short week.

The organisation of the conference took more than a year and was assured by the Centre for African Studies Basel and the Swiss Society for African Studies. The practical organisation was in the hands of three bodies: the Scientific Committee, the Programme Committee and the Conference Office. The scientific committee was composed of five Swiss and one German Africanists, while the programme committee had 23 members representing various centres of African studies in Europe. The conference officers were all local led by the experienced Veit Arlt who besides the website and logistics provided leadership of eight other team members who took care of the correspondence, financial operations, the organisation of student staff and volunteers, providing assistance with travel and travel grants for African participants, the preparation of the book exhibition and the film sessions. They did not rely on any external professional conference organiser firm. Instead, the conference office did all administrative and financial work but for catering relied on the well-known Migros company.

The theme of the conference was **Urban Africa – Urban Africans** subtitled *New encounters of the urban and the rural*. The theme attracted around 1,200 participants to Basel who convened and/or spoke in 204

panels. In addition, there were 10 round tables, 13 film sessions and 18 book launches. The whole scene was spiced with numerous publisher stands exposing and selling hundreds of books and promoting several journals, our *Modern Africa* included.

As usual there were plenary sessions. Not three but four keynote speakers addressed the participants because one plenary took place on the eve of the conference. Mirjam de Bruijn of Leiden University in the Netherlands spoke on “Digitalisation and the field of African studies.” She pointed out that the communication revolution marginalises Africa. Her twenty-year research in West and Central Africa led her to decolonise her understanding of knowledge production and search for ways how technological change may redefine African studies. Elísio Macamo of Basel University’s Centre for African Studies pronounced the Lugard Lecture sponsored by the International African Institute that exists since 1926. His task was complex and risky because of the colonial hangover connected with Lord Lugard. So the lecture was an eloquent balancing act between Lugard’s legacy and the demands Africanist research places on contemporary scholars, especially those originating from outside Europe. Actually, the ex officio keynote lecture was Joyce Nyairo’s “Urban Africa, Urban Africans: Binds, Boundaries and Belonging.” Nyairo is an independent researcher from Kenya, who concentrated on “glaring social divides between urban Africa(ns) and rural Africa(ns).” Specifically, the speaker was interested in the prototype of the Kenyan funeral and how class factors influence responses to death, dying and burying. Nyairo concluded that “tribe has not disappeared.” The fourth keynote address was by Edgar Pieterse, a South African researcher on urban policy who is the founding director of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. The lecturer aimed at a reinvention of urban governance that until recently had been hampered by the political denial of African urbanisation. This has recently changed when the African Union took an explicit pro-urban stance.

Before commenting on panels I would like to mention the round tables. They were ten and I managed to attend two of them. I had high expectations of the roundtable in honour of Patrick Harries, who died in 2016 after serving as a professor of African history in Basel for 15 years. I was disappointed because the round table consisted of monologues by seven people who knew Harries but there was no

discussion either among them or with the audience. The other round table I attended was “Scholarly Journals in African Studies: Meet the Editors.” Most speakers were from impacted journals based in the UK who mentored the listeners about how papers submitted to them would be treated. They assured that if the research is original and authors duly revise according to the instructions then there is a good chance to be published. However, according to them most authors get discouraged during the editing process and withdraw. There were questions but it seemed that young prospective authors were incredulous about their chances with these journals (*Journal of African History*, *Africa*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, etc.). *Modern Africa* was introduced by the present writer and people showed a lively interest by taking the latest issue and leaflets. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the round table on strategic essentialism that was subtitled “The Patrick Chabal Debate.” The point of this gathering was to assess to what extent “Africa” and “African” are used as labels that in fact essentialise purported African realities. The *Africa Works* book by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999) was highlighted as an example of more reflexive attitudes toward Africa in the Global North. Another round table that needs to be mentioned was chaired by the AEGIS president Clara Carvalho and dealt with challenges in African studies worldwide. Representatives of centres of African studies from such varied countries as the USA, Brazil, China, South Africa, Japan and India discussed recent changes of focus in African studies. Unfortunately, Africanists from Russia and East-Central Europe had not been invited to join the discussion.

It was difficult to choose between two hundred panels. Of course, one had to attend her or his panel in which one played a role as convenor, paper giver or discussant. But even though one would have been free to attend a session there were often collisions in the timetable. Each time-slot contained up to 30 panels (equal to the number of rooms available to the organisers) and normally one could be present only in one of them. Still there were people who left after a paper to go to another panel paper. Some panels had a numerous audience that exceeded the allocated room. This led to high temperatures in the room because air conditioning was absent. Still the programme proceeded quite smoothly. The time-slots were interspersed with coffee breaks that allowed for bumping into an acquaintance or browsing a book or two at the publishers stands. For example, the

panel 099 on “Traditional Chiefs and Democratic Political Culture on Africa” convened by Georg Klute and the present writer collided partly with the panel 002 on “Rural Despotism in Democratic South Africa.” Whereas the former claimed that chiefs can be promoters of democracy (my introductory paper was entitled “African Chiefs as Brokers of Democratic Political Culture”), the latter suggested that in South Africa chiefs were rural despots. It would have been great if the viewpoints and research results from both panels could be confronted in a joint session. But that will have to be postponed for another ECAS or other international Africanist forum. Some panels were convened by unexpected partners. The panel on cities in globalisation was organised by Céline Thiriot of Sciences Po Bordeaux and Kosuke Matsubara of the University of Tsukuba in Japan. Daniel Bach, also of Sciences Po Bordeaux, combined efforts with Camilla Adelle of the University of Pretoria in discussing the relevance of the European Union in Africa. Some panels had three speakers (minimum) and others eight (maximum). Afro-Asian ties were approached by two central Europeans, István Tarrósy of the University of Pécs in Hungary and Dominik Kopyński of the University of Wrocław in Poland while the panel was convened by Ian Taylor of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Vladimir Shubin of the Institute for African Studies in Moscow presented his ideas about the roots of the political crisis in South Africa with three South Africans from Johannesburg. Hana Horáková’s panel 092 on “Contemporary Politics of Informality: Encounters between the ‘Formal’ and ‘Informal’ African City” had five papers, two of them by Czech participants. Kateřina Mildnerová (Palacký University at Olomouc) spoke on social strategies and the negotiation of the legitimacy of witch-finders in Lusaka city. Vít Zdrálek (Charles University of Prague) presented a paper “Filling the Void of Post-Apartheid: Miracles of the Zion Christian Church in the Life of South African Township Dweller.”

Other panels attracted my interest as well: Michael Stasik (Bayreuth), Robert Heinze (Bern) and Sidy Cissokho (Edinburgh) convened a fascinating panel on bus stations in Africa as hubs of social and economic activity. Besides the introduction by Stasik eight papers were presented by young African and European researchers. Gregor Dobler (Freiburg/Germany) convened a panel on the unemployed in Africa that brought in new perspectives on everyday life of the unemployed. With this panel contrasted another on Africa’s nocturnal

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cities convened by Beth Vale of the University of the Witwatersrand. Lagos and Johannesburg nightlife could be compared to Lilongwe's social security after dawn. Still other panels discussed the position of old people in urbanising Africa, or contested waterfronts in Kenya, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. One of the main ECAS organisers, Till Förster of Basel, convened a panel on "African Cities and Urban Theory" that aimed at adjusting urban theory to the conditions of African cities. And so we could continue. To characterise more than 200 panels in one report is logistically impossible.

Therefore I shall close with stressing that European African studies continue to be vibrant and ambitious while critically rethinking the predicament of understanding and interpreting Africa from the outside. We look forward to the 2019 ECAS at Edinburgh and beyond.

