



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

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5th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) – Lisbon 26–29 June 2013

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Recommended citation:

Skalník, P. (2014). 5th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) – Lisbon 26–29 June 2013. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 1(2). Retrieved from <https://edu.uhk.cz/africa/index.php/ModAfr/article/view/137>



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REPORTS

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Petr Skalník

ECAS is organized biennially by the African-European Group for Interdisciplinary Studies or AEGIS (<http://www.aegis-eu.org>) which was established in 1991 „in order to build upon the resources and the research potential available within the Africanist institutions of the European Union“. Currently there are thirty European centres of African studies, all of which are located in Western Europe, and have joined AEGIS. Affiliated and associated membership has been recently introduced. Patrick Chabal was one of the founders and for years he served as the President of AEGIS. Due to his initiative the first ECAS took place at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in 2005. Further conferences were organized in Leiden in 2007, in Leipzig in 2009, in Uppsala in 2011. Although ECAS is a European conference it has profiled itself as a meeting place for African and other non-European Africanists. Among the invited speakers, for example, have been African and American scholars.

The Lisbon ECAS was attended by no less than 1000 Africanists, most of them coming from Western Europe. There were however many Africans, Americans, Canadians and some East Europeans as well. The theme of the conference was „African dynamics in a multipolar world“. In his inaugural note Paul Nugent, the President of AEGIS, remarked that Africa no longer looks up only to Europe for inspiration and aid but diversifies its interests towards Asia and the Americas. The local steering committee, namely Clara Carvalho and Manuel João Ramos, have added that African countries as global partners exert a growing influence in the world. According to them this trend will continue. That the topic was chosen appropriately is evidenced by an incredible number of panels, some 170 of them. The conference also comprised of a documentary film festival, a book show supported by a number of publishers, a photograph exhibition on Ethiopia and the Creation of the Organization of African Unity, a book exhibition on Lusophone Africa, the award of the Gerti Hesseling Prize for African scholars. There were three plenary sessions. Carlos Lopes spoke at

the opening of the ECAS on „The African moment: who is to be ready“. Alcinda Honwana delivered the Lugard Lecture sponsored by the International African Institute. She spoke about „Waithood“ which afflicts young Africans with qualifications but who are without a job. At the closing ceremony participants could hear Fatima Harrac on „A multipolar world in the making“. There were also eleven round table discussions and thirteen book launches. The 5th ECAS was evidently a big organizational challenge and the local Portuguese organizers and volunteers were very busy for months so that the event itself was a success. Below I will briefly characterize some of the panels.

As is usual at such gigantic conferences it was nearly impossible to gain a reasonable overview of the panels as there were just too many. The panel convened by Muiyiwa Falaiye called for the civil society policing of nominally democratic regimes in Africa. Speakers were mostly Nigerians who were concerned about their country's loss of civic spirit. One of the problems discussed was ethnic primordialism and the dangers of ethnic politics. Sören Scholvin attracted 12 speakers to his panel on “A new scramble for Africa? The rush for energy resources south of the Sahara”. The papers analyzed Chinese, American, British, Nigerian and South African strategies in this scramble for energy. Bettina Engels and Alex Veit convened a panel that examined African societies as they are responding to the pressures from the state and the international arena. There were panels on governing AIDS through aid to civil society, on religion, secularism and developmentalism, on studying Islam and Christianity in Africa. The panel of Paul Nugent and Isabella Soi on reciprocal comparison for post-colonial Africa complemented another panel on the politics of history in contemporary African border disputes. Mats Utas with two others came with an ultimate panel on fieldwork in conflict and war zones which had more speakers than most other panels. Utas' recent edited book *African Conflicts and Informal Power* (2012) might thus soon have a follow up. Several panels were dealing with the problems of urbanization, poverty and violence in historical and present day Africa. One of them addressed the question of designing African creative cities, the other urban governance in Africa. To many, ECAS conferences are forums of political scientists and historians. However, panels on literature in African languages, or on oral literature, linguistic dynamics in Africa, on African indigenous knowledge and language or on the African response to the choice of the language of instruction disprove this surmise. There were

panels on demographic trends and sexual culture in Africa and on gender, sexuality and pleasure, on the aftermath of civil war and diasporas and development. Helène Maria Kyed and Jocelyn Alexander convened a panel on policing which included vigilante and community forms of it. There were special panels on revolutions and post-revolution in Libya and Egypt. The panel on Peace-building and state-building dialectic in Africa attracted a number of speakers. The variety of panels and papers was such that virtually all social aspects of mostly present day Africa were taken up in them. Those who would like to browse through all the panels can do so online when they click on www.

African studies in post-communist Europe were represented mostly by Czech, Hungarian and Polish scholars. Dominik Kopiński and Andrzej Polus from Wrocław reported about their research in Zambia, namely on mineral tax regimes and civil society and the MMD ruling party. István Tarróssy discussed competition between China and Japan in their involvement with Africa. Jan Záhorkík from the University of West Bohemia chose the theme of nationalism(s) in Ethiopia which was presented in the panel on African nationalisms as subjects of historical research, convened by Baz Lecocq and Miles Larmer. Alemayehu Kumsa from Charles University convened a panel on “The roots of the Horn of Africa conflicts” which included his own paper on the conflict between the Ethiopian state and the Oromo people. Kateřina Rudincová from the University of West Bohemia discussed conflict and peace in Somalia whereas Polish Africanist Robert Klosowicz described Ethiopia as an island of stability. The present writer described African studies in post-communist Europe as a legitimate perspective on Africa in the panel on the European perspective of African studies, convened by Gregor Dobler and Elísio Macamo.

At a special session AEGIS has accepted as an associated member the Center of African Studies founded recently by Jan Záhorkík in the framework of the Department of History at Pilsen’s University of West Bohemia. The present writer informed the leadership of AEGIS about the imminent establishment of the Czech Association for African Studies (founded in October 2013). As the designated editor of the new journal *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* he addressed a number of world renowned Africanists and requested their membership in the International Advisory Board of the journal.

In conclusion we can consider ECAS5 a great success, not only of European Africanists, but also the Portuguese organizers. Five times makes up a tradition and therefore one can look forward to the forthcoming conferences with impatience and with healthy expectations.