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**Future Africa – Conference of the African Studies  
Association in Germany (VAD) – Bayreuth June  
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## REPORTS

### **FUTURE AFRICA – CONFERENCE OF THE AFRICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION IN GERMANY (VAD) – BAYREUTH JUNE 11-14, 2014**

Petr Skalník

Bayreuth is one of the most prolific Africanist centres in the world, with a number of professorships concerned with Africa, from development via anthropology, literature, economy, linguistics, history, etc. As the president of the University of Bayreuth stressed in his welcoming speech, 33 disciplines in all six faculties are involved in African studies. Bayreuth's Institute of African Studies is one of the major centres participating in the network of AEGIS (Africa/Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies). Part of it is now well-known BIGSAS alias Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies which was recently supplemented by Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies that invites established scholars to carry out research in a congenial atmosphere with all the desirable facilities.

The motto of the reviewed conference, namely "Future Africa", was taken from the Academy's main topic that aims at pointing out the potential of Africa becoming the laboratory of the future. The organizing team led by Georg Klute ably prepared and ran a conference which received nearly 400 paper abstracts. The keynote speaker invited by Klute was Dr Fatima Adamu of Sokoto's Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University. In her address she strived to answer the question "Is Africa Too Poor to Drive Its Future?" Her impassioned speech was received with ovations because she managed to persuade hundreds of listeners that Africa's stocks are increasing in value.

The biennial conferences of the VAD which has taken place since the late 1960s have developed into a major international Africanist event. The stress is on cooperation with Africa but specialists from other continents are welcome. This year about 550 participants arrived in Bayreuth, among them, for example, a substantial group of Indian

Africanists. They organized a special panel on India's involvement in Africa. However, there were 46 other panels at the conference, each attracting its own audience. As it is with most conferences, it was impossible to be present at all of the panels. I attended the above mentioned panel on India with 12 papers, 10 out of them presented by Indian scholars.

The topics varied from very general such as whether India, by its land grabs in Ethiopia and Madagascar, is a new imperialist in Africa, to specific relations of India with Nigeria, South Africa or Lusophone Africa. Related was a panel on Asian traders in Africa which discussed Chinese presence in different countries of the continent. Antoine Socpa reported about the competition between Chinese and African entrepreneurs in Cameroon. Alena Thiel described the ascent of street vendors in Accra who become transnational entrepreneurs in China, the new El Dorado.

Panel 13 convened by Alexander Stroh of GIGA, Hamburg, brought in papers dealing with the future of elections, political participation and representative democracy. Obert Hodzi revealed the commoditisation of elections in Zimbabwe while Irina Turner turned the attention of listeners to the free/born South Africans' deliberate disenfranchisement in South Africa's National Elections. What was very impressive was the workshops of young scholars who discussed questions connected with PhD supervision and mentoring, networking, research ethics and academic writing and publishing as well as the theorizing of social movements. There were also Round Tables concerned with the modernity of witchcraft, African agriculture, digitalization of Africa-related archives and libraries. What is also worth mentioning is the cultural programme which included the future of Nigerian theatre and future of arts, literature and culture in Kenya. The band "The Bigshots from Ghana" enlivened the conference with their well-attended concert. There was also a film programme featuring several pictures by African film makers.

I was fascinated by Panel 34 "Visions of the Future in the History of Africa and the Atlantic" convened by Christine Whyte and Achim von Oppen. John Lonsdale of Cambridge by comparing opposing views of Jomo Kenyatta and Louis Leakey tried to answer the question of Kikuyu ethnic reactions to modernity while Bruce Berman of Queens

University in Canada added Malinowski into the debate on what kind of modernity is/was suitable for Africa. Taking part in this panel prevented me in going to Panel 9 on “Travelling in Africa” convened by Kurt Beck and Rami Wadelnour. The first convenor spoke about technological dramas in the time of transition from absence of regular roads to highways with police patrols, driving licence and roadworthiness controls, road marking and the likes of formal motorism. The other convenor presented an account of the overload and ‘undifferentiated transport of passengers and load’ while travelling long-distances in Sudan. Other participants in the panel such as the Nigerian anthropologist Nnanna Arukwe spoke about Road Safety Law Enforcement in West Africa while Sidy Cissokho of Paris I discussed the reactions of professional unionized drivers to the reforms of urban transport in Dakar. Sebastian Wenz added his findings about the indispensability of fitters to African road transport while Hanna Lena Reich of Bayreuth shared with listeners her experiences of long-distance travelling by bus in Tanzania.

Panel 31 “African capitalisms” was well attended and was convened by Thomas Bierschenk of Mainz. The convenor pointed out that capitalist actors in Africa are under-researched and indigenous African capitalism is treated by Africanists as if it does not exist. The panel showed that the issue is far from settled. Toulouse researcher Anouk Batard examined the Nigerian film industry nicknamed Nollywood as an “unintended baby from the Structural Adjustment Programmes.” Chambi Chachage of Harvard reported about post-national capitalist class in post-Nyerere Tanzania. Michael Stasik of Bayreuth presented an excellent analysis of what he calls ‘vernacular neoliberalism’ on the example of his research of public transport entrepreneurs in Ghana. He showed that their self-regulating economic ingenuity ensured that their business was thriving even when others stagnated. Olabisi Shoaga of Bordeaux considered internet shopping in Nigeria where the standards of goods are unreliable and therefore consumers have to organize themselves into networks of online consumer activists. Florian Schaefer of SOAS discussed new agrarian capitalists in Ethiopia who engage in large-scale coffee plantations and cut flower production. The paper concluded that the understanding of concrete capitalisms in contemporary Africa depends on the combination of empirical studies with the knowledge of history and political economy.

The variety of panels was astounding. Only when I turned all pages of a three hundred page conference catalogue did I notice panel “20 years after Afrofuturism in Aural and Visual Cultures”. Convened by Kerstin Pinther (Free University Berlin) and Hauke Dorsch of Mainz, this panel introduces the width of the concept of Afrofuturism which ‘interrogates the past, present and future in humanities, sciences, religion, and challenges the Eurocentric motifs of identity, time and space’. One only regrets that such fascinating topics might take years before they are published and made accessible beyond the conference presentations. Similarly, the panel called “African movements in globalisation and transnationalisation” convened by Bettina Engels and Melanie Müller ((both Free University Berlin) posed the question of social movements and political struggles in Africa. Engels shows that food price riots in Burkina Faso had an international framework. The conference took place before the recent popular revolution in Burkina and one wonders how Engels could have explained the success of it with reference to the mobilization against the high cost of living in that West African country.

To conclude the writer of the present report would like to stress that the VAD conference was a great success, not only organizationally but especially by exposing the wide spectrum of current African studies and the vocal place of German research on Africa in it.