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## **Report on the 9th International Conference on African Studies “Viva Africa” held at Prague, 22–23 October 2015**

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## REPORTS

### 9<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN STUDIES “VIVA AFRICA“, PRAGUE, OCTOBER 22-23, 2015

Petr Skalník

The Viva Africa conference has been a representative undertaking of the Czech Association for African Studies. Originally it was organized yearly in Plzeň (Pilsen) in the west of the Czech Republic from 2006 on. After three initial gatherings in Plzeň the organisation moved to Hradec Králové in Eastern Bohemia. The last conference again took place in Plzeň in 2013. There the Czech Association for African Studies was founded and it was decided that the conference will forthwith be organized biennially. Most of the previous conferences were followed by publication of proceedings or carefully edited collective monographs. Some of them were published and distributed by Lit Verlag.

Yet the first Viva Africa took place in Prague, where African studies started in 1961, but after more than forty years of existence ceased to exist not long ago. This year the conference was organized by the Metropolitan University Prague. The next conference, in 2017, will return to Hradec Králové. The topic of the conference under review was ‘Knowledge Production On and Within Africa’. The format of Viva Africa conferences has been international, there have been no registration fees, papers are presented and discussed in English. The face-to-face size of the meeting allowed for plenary sessions throughout the conference. Obviously, Viva Africa has been an opportunity for Czech and Central European Africanists to discuss their findings with participants from other parts of Europe, from Africa and further afield.

This year’s Viva Africa had a packed programme. After the opening speech by the Rector Magnificus of the Metropolitan University of Prague and the keynote address by Daniel Bach of Bordeaux (see

summary of his speech below), there followed five panels in one and a half day, originally comprising 26 papers. That would have been too much, given mere 90 minutes per panel. 'Luckily' in four out of five panels some participants did not arrive while at least one apologized just because there was not enough time space for his paper. The papers were grouped into panels according to the topics dealt with.

The panel 1 heading was 'Contemporary State and Politics' and diverse papers dealt with the generation of knowledge about models of political and social organization in the north of Mali and Niger (Georg Klute of Bayreuth University), indigenous gardening as a way to demonstrate belonging by non-Africans (Mvuselelo Ngcoya and Narendran Kumarakulasingham of the University of Kwazulu-Natal), Somalia as a failed state and at the same time improving (Victor Marsai of Budapest's National University of Public Service), Boko Haram as a logical result of socio-economic conditions in Northeastern Nigeria (Vladimír Klíma, emeritus of the Oriental Institute, Prague).

Panel 2 on 'Representation and the Study of Africa' was also full of diversity. Petr Skalník (University of Hradec Králové) reported on his experience with knowledge production while carrying out fieldwork in West Africa while Getnet Tamene (University of A. Dubček in Trenčín, Slovakia) discussed problems of inequities regarding knowledge and knowledge production in Africa. Veronika Danielová of Trnava's University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius critically looked at images about the 'dark continent' then and now and Marta Nowakowska of Wrocław's Gen. T. Kościuszko Military Academy submitted to merciless critique images of Africa in Polish printed and online media. The fifth paper in this panel dealt with African Christianity as a hybrid between world views (Anna Niedźwiedz, Jagiellonian University, Cracow).

Panel 3 on 'International Engagement with Africa' opened with a powerful critique of the 'Africa rising' slogan by Ian Taylor (University of St. Andrews, Scotland), followed by a discussion of the controversial involvement of China and the United States in the African petroleum sector (Dominik Kopiński of the University of Wrocław). Alžběta Šváblová of Bayreuth University spoke about her research on reconciliation in Liberia. The last paper in this panel was on the politics of representation of contemporary African literature (Dorota Pucherová of the Slovak Academy of Sciences).

Panel 4 was entitled 'African Histories' and was the only where all scheduled participants were actually present. It was introduced by Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, who sketched the 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography of Africa and pointed to trends in the present 21<sup>st</sup> century. More concretely Jarmila Švihranová of the Danubius University showed in her paper how Africans were represented in German imperial documents on German Southwest Africa, today's Namibia. The symbolism of colonial Omdurman was shown on archival photographs (Maciej Kurcz of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius at Trnava, Slovakia). Alemayehu Kumsa of Charles University Prague presented a study of the historical development of Boko Haram. Finally Silvester Trnovec of the Slovak Academy of Sciences showed how the history of West Africa was influenced by French colonial historical concepts. A lively discussion had to be cut short because of time restraints.

Panel 5 entitled 'Cultural Issues' was in contrast to previous panels shorter because only two out of five speakers arrived. Vít Zdrálek of Charles University Prague discussed bio-ethnography as applied to South African music research. Kateřina Mildnerová of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius illustrated the Eurocentrism of the Christian missionary conceptualization of *vodun* on the basis of her field data from southern Benin.

The conference was complemented by cultural programmes in the evening of the first day and two book launches of recent publications by Kateřina Mildnerová, *From Where Does the Bad Wind Blow? Spiritual Healing and Witchcraft in Lusaka* (2015), and *Global Challenges, Local Reactions: Czech Republic and South Africa*, (2014), edited by Hana Horáková and Stephanie Rudwick. Both were published by Lit Verlag in Berlin. The latest issue of *Modern Africa* (3-1-2015) was distributed for free to the participants.

The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on African Studies has successfully carried on a fine tradition of Central European conferences that is now firmly anchored in the international calendar of African Studies. Remarkable was the number of papers from Slovakia. It was decided to publish a selection of the conference papers under the editorship of Hana Horáková and Kateřina Werkman. It is hoped that in the coming

years Viva Africa will continue to contribute to the scholarly exchange within Europe and especially with African Africanists.