



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

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## The 6th European Conference on African Studies, Paris 8–10 July 2015

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### Recommended citation:

Skalník, P. (2015). The 6th European Conference on African Studies, Paris 8–10 July 2015. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 3(1), 153–156. Retrieved from <https://edu.uhk.cz/africa/index.php/ModAfr/article/view/117>



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## THE 6<sup>TH</sup> EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN STUDIES, PARIS 8-10 JULY 2015

Petr Skalník

The biennial European conferences on African studies are now firmly fixed in the calendar of all who want to communicate their research findings to colleagues not only in Europe but also on other continents. This year the conference, organized by the Institut des mondes africains (IMAF) and Les Afriques dans le monde (LAM) took place in the buildings of the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and attendance was very high. Registered participants surpassed 1300 although not all came. More colleagues would have attended if the registration fee had not been so high (200 Euro). If we realise that most Africans live on 1 Euro a day then this fee is simply scandalously high. Does it mean that Africanists are those whose incomes surpass 50 times the income of Africans? At any rate to be an Africanist in Europe appears to be a luxury enterprise, enabling Europeans to watch Africa from the safe distance of rich Europe. Therefore one cannot avoid thinking of cynicism and irony when we realise that the theme of the conference was the “Collective Mobilisations in Africa. Contestation, Resistance, Revolt.” Nevertheless there were Africans among the European Africanists and also some Africans from Africa among the participants in the ECAS 6. The spectrum was supplemented by American and Asian Africanists. However, Africanists from the former Communist bloc were just too few to be noticeable, probably because they do not belong to the European rich.

The opening ceremony reminded the listeners that Patrick Chabal, former president of AEGIS, passed away in the period between the 5th and 6th ECAS (for the obituary and memorial issue, see *Modern Africa*, vol. 1). His contribution to critical African studies cannot be easily overestimated. Pierre Boilley and Céline Thiriot, the respective directors of IMAF and LAM, mentioned that these institutions are new merger developments on the French scene. The African Studies Network of France (GIS) and CNRS give considerable support to African studies in France. The speakers expressed the thought that the conference would reaffirm “the fundamental importance of reflecting on Africa

and its diasporas as spaces intimately linked to the world at large, in ways that eschew simplification, focusing instead on diversity and doing away once and for all with stereotypes, condescending clichés and all too common lapses into Afro-pessimism.” Paul Nugent, in his last presidential address before he stepped down, admitted that AEGIS growth has slowed but expressed the hope that the next president, Clara Carvalho, will continue caring for African studies in Europe. The Gerti Hesselung Prize, promoting the work of African scholars was also awarded at a special session. The conference included beside a plethora of 235 panels (each panel had a maximum of 5 panelists) four plenary sessions with keynote speakers, a number of round tables, book launches, film screenings, publishers’ exhibition and a weeklong arts performance of ‘Africa Acts.’

The main keynote address, attached to the opening of the ECAS 6, was delivered by Mamoudou Gazibo, political scientist from Université de Montréal in Canada. He comparatively examined collective mobilizations and democratization in Africa. He attempted to understand the new wave of protest rocking Africa and asked the question why some regimes are more vulnerable to popular uprisings than others? Ousmane Oumar Kane from the Harvard Divinity School in the USA, presented the Lugard Lecture. He analyzed Arabo-Islamic learning in West Africa and thus assess the contribution of Muslim scholars to the production and transmission of knowledge and its contribution to the state and society there. The Codesria Lecture was offered by Cheikh Ibrahima Niang of Dakar, Senegal. He addressed the cultural concepts of freedom and dignity as related to the community resilience to the Ebola epidemics in West Africa. The author based his paper on fieldwork carried out in Sierra Leone, Mali and Guinea. The last plenary speaker was Jemima Pierre from the University of California at Los Angeles and her topic was “Pan-Africanism, Decolonization and the Black Radical Tradition.” The speaker blamed the failure of decolonization and the unsuccessful analysis of colonialism for the current ascent of ‘neoliberal neocolonialism.’

Among the panels many did not correspond to the main theme of the conference. These could have been interesting equally as the topical ones. For example there was a panel on the concepts of justice in African philosophy, two panels on the right to the city, another on gender, sexuality and re-interpretations of ‘African culture and

tradition', big-man power in the African context. Other panels were on citizenship on the state margins, political parties in Africa or the African middle classes, pan-Africanism in relation to the nation-state, governing war but producing the state, street children in Africa, militancy in the Sahara. The panel African arts in the former socialist bloc countries was intriguing, convened by Romuald Tchibofo from Benin. Similarly a panel convened by Abel Kouvouama and Lucette Labache broached the topic of studying in the former Soviet bloc as a protest project. Chris Saunders and Helder Fonseca convened a session on liberation in southern Africa while Baz Lecocq organized a session on the historical dimensions of Mali-Azawad. Manuel Ramos and Preben Kaarsholm convened the panel on collective mobilisations in Africa and the Indian Ocean. Elísio Macamo and Noemi Steuer dedicated their panel to the biographies and utopias of protesting students in West Africa during the 1960s and 1980s. The majority of papers nevertheless approached from different angles the main topic of mobilisations. The lengthy row of panels does not allow me to mention them all. I shall limit myself to those panels and round tables I was able to attend. Arrigo Pallotti and Melber Henning convened a panel on collective mobilisations under former liberation movements in southern Africa, whereas Miles Larmer and Vito Laterza put together a panel on social and political mobilisation in mining communities in southern and central Africa. My own panel dealt with the comparison of the political cultures of post-colonial Africa and post-communist Europe. The papers compared political culture in countries as diverse as Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia on the African side, and the Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria on the European side. Good attendance and a lively discussion showed that the topic was relevant and I hope to publish the papers. One panelist from Bulgaria could not come because of the prohibitive costs of registration.

There were eleven round tables at ECAS 6 devoted to various topics such as the ebola epidemic, Boko Haram, gender, ethics, and journalists in crisis. I attended the round table convened by Georg Klute which discussed spatial readings of violent conflict in Africa. Several speakers such as Jon Abbink, Till Förster, Jana Hoenke, and Clionadh Raleigh shared with the audience their experience. The advantage of round tables, especially under skilled leadership, is that they allow for discussion more than panels. So it was in two other round tables that I attended. They were meant to explain how Africanist journals

work, what are the problems to be tackled before a text is accepted for publication. They also discussed promoting young scholars and interdisciplinary research. Speakers included Nic Cheeseman from *African Affairs*, Henning Melber of *Africa Spectrum*, Peter Geschiere (*African Studies Review*), Nadège Chabloz (*Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*) and several others. I was able to mention repeatedly *Modern Africa* and the problems we are encountering in publishing it, especially recruitment of peer reviewers. Round table participants were informed about the new journal. A special leaflet prepared for the conference was distributed widely.

The representative book exhibition not only showed that production in the field of African studies is enormous and growing fast but also that prices of books grow and become prohibitive for individuals.

The ECAS 6 proved that meetings of this kind are important both scientifically and socially. The problem is the enormous number of panels which on the one hand enables many young researchers to present their findings but it is practically impossible to attend but a handful of the panels. Round tables, on the other hand, proved their usefulness by more democratic attendance and active participation from the audience. Luckily, the conference booklet was very well prepared and easy to use so that at least one could see what is happening at every moment of the conference. The next ECAS 7 will be organized by the Centre for African Studies at Basel, Switzerland, 22-24 June 2017. The theme will be Urban Africa - Urban Africans – New encounters of the urban and the rural.