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African Studies in Distress: German Scholarship on Africa and the Neglected Challenge of Decoloniality

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Abstract

This paper is a response to Matthias Basedau's article published in issue 55/2020 of the present journal. At a time when African Studies scholarship is rising beyond the flogging of dead horses, certain strands in the field in Germany seem to ignore much of the valuable scholarship and intellectual contributions by excellent African and non-African researchers alike. It is striking to see how Basedau falls prey to the same shortcomings that he draws our attention to, that is, the domination of African Studies by sources and figures outside the continent and the construction of Africa as a space of lack. This underscores the urgency of decolonizing African Studies at many levels, including liberating it from the straightjacket of area studies, interrogating purportedly objective scholarship, and opening it up to new theoretical perspectives. The restriction to comparative approaches will only ensure that these strands in African Studies remain stuck in their epistemological cul-de-sac.

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Keywords

African Studies, knowledge production, decoloniality

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Matthias Basedau's "Four Challenges"

In *Africa Spectrum* 55/2020, political scientist Matthias Basedau published an article titled, "Rethinking African Studies: Four Challenges and the Case for Comparative African Studies," in which he laid out his vision for African Studies, embedding it in the broader comparative agenda of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). With this response, we would like to take up Basedau's invitation "to disagree and to suggest corrections and modifications" (2020: 196).

Basedau identifies the four challenges as (1) the "domination of outside, often Western perspectives" in the study of Africa, (2) the currency of "undifferentiated and often negative views" of Africa, (3) the lacking attention to the "causal revolution," which translates into the negligence of methodologies that focus on identifying causes, and (4) the prevalence of micro perspectives at the expense of "the big picture and the *longue durée*" (2020: 195). In a nutshell, Basedau's response to these interrelated challenges lies in the approach pursued and further developed by GIGA-based scholars over the past few years: Comparative Area Studies, or CAS. In Basedau's adaptation, the acronym stands for Comparative African Studies, which he advocates together with a plea addressed to his colleagues in Germany to engage in multidisciplinary and mixed-methods research.

As we argue here, Basedau's argument suffers from a number of flaws that considerably undermine his case. First, even though his initial challenge explicitly raises the issue of the domination of outside perspectives, his proposed solution consists of merely emphasizing, in a rather Eurocentric manner and without referencing the existence of a rich African archive, the need for a "diversity of views in conjunction with constant questioning of our own biases" (2020: 198). However, he limits the diversity in researcher demographics to Africans on the continent (marked as racialized positions; 2020: 195) while disregarding gendered and classed positionalities which have long been active in knowledge production in African Studies, but continue to be woefully underrepresented in academic spaces.¹ Such lacunae are especially painful in view of the range of scholarship produced, for example, by Black German scholars, who also remain marginalized in mainstream academia.²

Second, Basedau's critique of the prevalence of negative views of Africa is built on a questionable claim to impartial scholarship, which further underscores his failure to account for the challenge of decoloniality. His concern is with contemporary Western stereotypes that, according to him, overlook progress in many areas (2020: 194). But he does not engage with the long-standing stereotypes and prejudices that were brought to bear on African contexts, spaces, politics, and cultural and value systems, which constructed negative views of Africa as a space of lack, as ahistorical, amoral, backward, incapable of education and advancement.³ A critical rethinking of African Studies would have to consider the question as to how such negative views came to be entrenched in ostensibly "objective" scholarship, thus exposing the role of Western scholarship in generating these same negative views of Africa.

Third, by insisting on the necessity of turning to the study of causes and effects, Basedau displays a rather limited understanding of the questions African Studies needs to answer, as well as a rather narrow view of the field's disciplinary breadth and

methodological diversity. Moreover, his take on causes and effects fails to pay the required attention to modes of coloniality and epicoloniality, i.e. colonial characteristics extant at, before or after the historical moment and political–legal relations traditionally ascribed to colonialism. As Kessi et al., have pointed out, “Epicolonial dynamics are phenomena for which the cause may or may not be directly traced to legacies or histories of overt or observed colonial encounters, but in which power relations and outcomes are recognizably colonial” (Kessi et al., 2020: 271). Therefore, proper consideration of the dimension of causality requires this particular methodological angle that allows us to rethink African Studies in broader decolonial frames.

Fourth, Basedau’s advocacy of the “big picture” reveals his attachment to the confines of political science and the study of international relations, which once again comes at the expense of decolonial perspectives. Given the fact that “big pictures” are best viewed from a distance, this demand begs the question of white Global North hegemonic epistemological gazes from which this picture is constructed. It is also from here that Basedau’s insider/outsider binary needs to be scrutinized: when he posits non-African researchers as “outsiders” to African spaces and contexts whose views need to be complemented by the insights of “insiders” (2020: 198, 201), what is the actual role he assigns to the “insiders”? Does it go beyond the function of guides, translators, and informants who provide raw data for research projects run by “outsiders”? Also, who are the beneficiaries when it comes to benefiting from these knowledge production practices within academic settings? Rather than simply invoking the “diversity of views” (2020: 198), Basedau could have interrogated the Eurocentricity of the macro perspective he advocates, as well as the interpretive sovereignty of Global North knowledge production practices.

Against this canvas, the problem of African Studies in Germany (or elsewhere) is primarily neither a methodological one, nor is comparison the solution. Since Basedau fails to acknowledge that the challenge is actually of an epistemological nature, his proposal to rethink African Studies leaves us with the rather agonizing impression of African Studies in distress.

In the following, we revisit Basedau’s four challenges and his solution in terms of three problems and a conclusion on the urgency of decolonizing African Studies in Germany and beyond. The first problem we will tackle is African Studies without Africans, followed by the politics of impartial scholarship. Next, we will address the pitfalls of cause and effect in African Studies, where we will also emphasize the added value of taking a relational perspective in studying African lifeworlds. The concluding section, “Critical African Studies or Comparative Area (African) Studies?”, makes the case for the former, underscoring the need for an epistemic turn toward decoloniality, not only in terms of theory, but also as a research practice.

Problem # I: African Studies Without Africans

African Studies refers to transdisciplinary knowledge production concerning Africa or Africans. This includes scholarship *in, by, with, for, of, on, and from* Africa and Africans.
Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks & Elelwani Ramugondo⁴

In late May 2019, selected members of the *Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland* (VAD), the largest African Studies association in Germany, convened in Frankfurt am Main to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Notably predominantly white male German scholars were invited as panelists to engage in reflections on the history of German African Studies. Three weeks earlier, the historian Jürgen Zimmerer of the University of Hamburg had declared his intention to terminate his VAD membership, unless the organizers revised their plans not to include African scholars as speakers at the event. In his response, Hans Peter Hahn, professor of anthropology at the Goethe University Frankfurt and the chairperson of the VAD at the time, expressed his regrets over Zimmerer's stance, pointing out that the event had been planned well in advance, whereby all VAD members had been invited to weigh in on questions of panel organization.⁵ Moreover, according to Hahn, the event was not open for the public, but rather had the character of an "internal anniversary festivity" (*vereinsinterne Jubiläumsfeierlichkeit*),⁶ as if such a format absolved the VAD board from inviting African scholars to take part in the proceedings.

This episode is indicative of a larger problem that pervades African Studies not only in Germany, but other countries in the Global North as well: the continued lack of involvement of Africans in African Studies, be it in academic positions, in the curriculum, or in the bibliographies of the articles and books published by white scholars. Even though Basedau acknowledges this persistent imbalance in his remarks on the domination of outside perspectives, one notes that the institution he is directing—GIGA's Institute for African Affairs—featured exactly one African woman researcher out of a total of 29 listed on the website in December 2020.⁷ Among the affiliated researchers from other institutions, 1 out of 11 was African.

To be fair, it needs to be acknowledged that the researcher demographics do not look much better at most African Studies institutions in Germany. Interestingly, for Basedau the underrepresentation of Africans in African Studies is not primarily due to "intentional marginalization," but rather attributable to the lack of higher education opportunities in Africa (2020: 197).⁸ Based on a statistical survey of authorship and content in selected African Studies journals over the past 2 years, Basedau deplores that "70 percent of authors are of non-African origin" (*ibid.*). Despite this pertinent observation, Basedau remains vague about the extent to which Africans are themselves to blame for their underdeveloped academic institutions and hence for their own underrepresentation. Once more, for a deeper understanding, it would be necessary to consider epicolonial phenomena in academic settings as often experienced by African and other Black scholars and scholars of color. These issues are succinctly expressed by the Ghanaian gender studies scholar Akosua Adomako Ampofo, who underscores how power in the academy defines research priorities and resource distribution, marginalizes other voices, and limits access to the so-called high-impact journals by scholars based in Africa (2016: 17). In other words, in order to understand the discrepancies in academic knowledge production, we need to consider the coloniality of knowledge production processes, alongside the power relations involved in determining who has the epistemic authority and which types of scholarship from which perspectives get published.

Basedau's suggested remedy for this discrepancy entails "efforts to 'research with the region,'" which he sees particularly well implemented in the *Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa* (MIASA), run jointly by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana (2020: 197). Readers familiar with German African Studies topographies will wonder why Basedau omits reference to two earlier and no less significant efforts to promote "African Studies with Africans": the Point Sud Centre for Research on Local Knowledge based at the Goethe University Frankfurt and in Bamako, and the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth with its five partner universities on the continent. Basedau's failure to mention these two institutions is the more striking when considered in the light of his explanation of why his article focuses on African Studies in Germany: "The reason is simple: I know more about African Studies in Germany than in other countries" (ibid.). Apparently, there are a quite few developments he has missed; not least the more recent establishment of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth.

Be that as it may, the predicament is not limited to the level of representation. Albeit desirable solutions include recruiting more African or Afro-German researchers in African Studies in Germany, improving African scholars' access to publishing in certain journals, and increasing collaborations between African and non-African researchers, the problem's root cause concerns the terms and modes of knowledge production. Following in the footsteps of the conveners of the VAD golden jubilee then, Basedau's failure to recognize the epistemological dimension of the problem is rather disillusioning.

An illustrative example of this failure is Basedau's deployment of the insider/outsider binary in African Studies. Equating the "insider" with the African view and the "outsider" with the non-African, Western perspective, he maintains that "African realities should not (only) be recounted by outside voices," and that "the broader inclusion of African views offers some distinct benefits" (2020: 198). Although he does not specify these benefits, we can get a glimpse of the division of labor when he points out that, "Western and other non-African scholars are burdened with a number of stereotypes, and ... often evince a lack of specific knowledge" (ibid.). Apparently, the task of the African "insider" consists of enlightening non-African "outsiders" about local specificities, who then use their Western toolkit to provide "proper" analyses. Even if we assume that Basedau's "rethinking of African Studies" is not predicated on the premise that the inclusion of African "insiders" is desirable because it is beneficial to non-African "outsiders," African research subjects run once again the risk of being reduced to a subsidiary role in the process of knowledge production. In this scenario the African archive is ignored or, at best, exploited as a reservoir of "insider" knowledge, bringing back to mind Owomoyela's concern about African Studies failing its ideal of producing and promoting knowledge about Africa for purposes other than its exploitation (Owomoyela, 1994).⁹

While it is clear that future VAD anniversaries should be unthinkable without African speakers and that a GIGA Institute for African Affairs cannot be viable

without greater visibility and integration of non-white researchers, it is our contention that the only substantial remedy for the lack of African perspectives in African Studies is a clear epistemological shift, which has to go much deeper than merely increasing the representation of Africans. The epistemic position matters more than the geographic location or origin of the researcher. We should expect all scholars of African Studies, whether White, Black, or People of Color, to be “insiders” engaging with the African archive and thus shaping and transforming their field. The “big picture” also needs to take into account current knowledge production strands by Black German and African scholars and activists if the efforts to diversify perspectives in African Studies are serious.¹⁰ It is therefore incumbent on white-positioned African Studies scholars to engage with the theorizations, interrogations, and debates generated by Black scholars from the continent and its diasporas as salient contributions to the field of African Studies.¹¹

To conclude this section, we would like to underscore the urgency for African Studies scholars at German institutions (and elsewhere in the Global North) to address the two core questions of decoloniality and strive toward the structural and conceptual changes needed to conduct research together with Africans: who produces knowledge on Africa, and where is the African archive in this knowledge production? In the words of Liberian scholar Robtel Neajai Pailey: “We need to put the ‘African’ in African Studies, not as a token gesture, but as an affirmation that Africans have always produced knowledge about their continent” (Pailey, 2016).

Problem # 2: The Politics of Impartial Scholarship

Nowhere is it, in the long run, more difficult to preserve the interest of scholarship than there, where uncomfortable facts and the hardship of the realities of life are denied. *Max Weber*¹²

At the end of his introduction, Basedau undertakes the laudable attempt “to reveal my personal background and related biases” (2020: 195). What follows is a series of statements that clarify his professional (but not his personal) position, the most striking of which advocates that “the constant challenge for a scholar is to remain impartial and work against any personal confirmation bias that may result from potentially unconscious preconceptions” (2020: 195–196).

Even if we acknowledge Basedau’s willingness to reflect on his preconceptions, his claims about impartial scholarship are problematic and, when seen against the backdrop of the history of African Studies, also troubling. The question of epistemology and ideology, objectivity and subjectivity, and worse still of science versus culture is at the core of knowledge politics in general (Grosfoguel, 2007; Seesemann, 2018). In fact, pretensions to pure scholarship labeled as non-situated, neutral, universal, and truthful have been among the major problems of European epistemology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, 2020). Max Weber, whose famous essay “Wissenschaft als Beruf” (“Scholarship as Profession”) Basedau cites in support of his call to keep personal views out of one’s scholarship, is a case in point.

Indeed, Weber's own observation of the difficulty of preserving "the interest of scholarship," quoted in the epigraph to this section, makes the notion of Weberian "impartiality" appear a conundrum. Are research agendas not set up to interrogate "uncomfortable facts and hardships of the realities of life"? Do personal experiences and political convictions not contribute to formulating the very questions that shape academic stances and research agendas? Here, African feminist scholar Amina Mama's observation in one of her seminal essays bears some scrutiny:

African scholarly traditions have consistently rejected the liberal philosophical assumption that demands disengagement and distance from social context rather than engagement and action. For Africans, ethical scholarship is socially responsible scholarship that supports freedom, not scholarship that is free from social responsibility. (2007: 23)

Hence, while the non-African "outsider" can afford to remain "impartial" and disengage from social context in knowledge production, s*he leaves the onus of socially responsible scholarship with the African "insider."¹³ A critical African Studies perspective, therefore, needs to acknowledge that knowledge production is imbricated in "the moral and affective economies that shape researchers' entanglements with the phenomena they describe" (Martin et al., 2015: 613), whereas disinterested "objective" scholarship tends to "leave intact binaries that circumscribe realms of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and the pervasive bifurcations that prioritize the rational over the sensory and affective dimensions of knowledge" (ibid.). Similarly, Bagele Chilisa provides a detailed analysis of researcher entanglement in the frame of reflexivity:

Reflexivity in this context refers to the assessment of the influence of the researcher's background and ways of perceiving reality, perceptions, experiences, ideological biases and interests during research. The researcher is the main data collection instrument. The researcher also analyses, interprets and reports the findings. It is important, therefore, that the researcher's thoughts, feelings, frustrations, fears, concerns, problems and ideas are recorded throughout the study. (2020: 215–216)

Thus, in the light of the above, the solution to the problem of objectivity and subjectivity is not to seek impartiality in scholarship, but rather to grapple with the issues that are at the core of the question of knowledge production, including power, identity, geography, biography, and ego-politics as captured in the Cartesian principle *cogito ergo sum*. We are called upon to be attentive to the complex intersections of social positionality, geographical location, and epistemic location of knowledge producers, issues that are still widely ignored or misunderstood. Grosfoguel's observation (unwittingly confirmed by Max Weber in retrospect) merits attention here: "Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (2007: 213). It is these complicated politics of knowledge that requires us as African Studies scholars to take decoloniality seriously.

While some scholars appear better than others in concealing their political-cognitive commitments and personal convictions, their academic stances are articulated from particular loci of enunciation, implying that no academic work is entirely free from political positions and personal ideals. Even Max Weber's works are obviously inscribed in his worldview and socialization as a white-privileged cis-heteropatriarchal masculine subject at the time of the German *Kaiserreich* and the post-First World War German Republic. Given Basedau's own white German masculine locus of enunciation from Hamburg – a city whose academic institutions and economy was highly implicated in Germany's colonial past – it is remarkable that he entertains pretenses to impartial scholarship devoid of engagements with neocolonial, neoliberal, patriarchal, and indeed locational issues within the present global capitalist world order.

What is even more problematic than the illusion of impartial scholarship is the politics behind claims to objectivity. The history of African Studies is full of examples where white-positioned privileged professors successfully undermined the credibility of African or African-American scholars by upholding the elusive ideal of neutrality (Allman, 2019). Thus, the emphasis on “impartiality” and “objectivity” has served to exclude entire strands of scholarship, and continues to do so.¹⁴ This takes us back once again to African Studies without Africans, raising the question of how African Studies can actually *not* take sides and *not* manifest itself as engaged scholarship. Therefore, it is high time to extend the rethinking of African Studies to the epistemic issues of the 21st century. The actual task is the productive integration of the political and the personal in knowledge production, while recognizing that the posture of purportedly pure scholarship is not adequate to this task.

Problem # 3: Pitfalls of Cause and Effect

What is at issue is the primacy of relations over *relata* and the intra-active emergence of “cause” and “effect” as enacted by the agential practices that cut things together and apart. *Karen Barad*¹⁵

Apart from promoting Comparative African Studies, the major conceptual intervention Basedau seeks to make pertains to what he calls “the causal revolution.” Meaningful research, he suggests, is that which looks into the causes and effects of the phenomena under study. Positing causality as a “precondition for designing policies that can solve problems” (2020: 199), Basedau propounds that, “only when we correctly identify causes can we exploit our knowledge to promote further progress” (*ibid.*).

Considering his stance on objectivity, it is not surprising that Basedau promotes causality as its corollary. Although he does not disclose the philosophical or theoretical premises underlying his approach to the study of cause and effect, what he seems to have in mind are recent trends in economics, international relations, and political science that propagate causal identification aimed at isolating the cause-and-effect mechanism between two or more variables (see *ibid.*: 199–200). Here, causal inference is based on methods to compute causal relations between variables encoded in relationships

among other variables in a system. The principal problem with such approaches, even when they involve a qualitative research design, is that they rest on quantitative decisions made by the researcher: which effects and interactions are presumed to be relevant, which ones are not? As the choice of the variables already involves presumptions about the cause, the problem of circularity cannot easily be ruled out. Last but not least, such approaches might not always accurately reveal the causal impact and the direction of causation.

However, most of the methodological approaches Basedau refers to are not directly connected to the algorithms and computing methods hailed as the “causal revolution.” He seems content with any work engaged with the search for causes, lamenting that, according to his survey of 66 articles published in selected African Studies journals in 2019 and early 2020, only 4.5% explicitly mention the identification of causality among their objectives (2020: 204n7). The multidisciplinary and mixed-methods approach that he advocates for African Studies basically consists of a rather eclectic mix of qualitative and quantitative methods drawn from the social sciences (*ibid.*: 203), glossing over deeper methodological divides and conflicting ways of generating insights connected to quantitative and qualitative research designs.¹⁶

These methodological debates aside, there is a much more fundamental issue that needs to be resolved before we proceed to identifying the proper mix of methods: are we actually asking the right question? Is the predicament of Africa and African Studies a causal one that can only be resolved through causal explanations? Is it worthwhile, let alone feasible, to focus on “ruling out variables other than the presumed cause of a given effect” (Basedau, 2020: 199)? Such a focus may have its merits when it comes to applied fields like governance, legislation, and development, where problem-oriented approaches might indeed be pertinent. However, the search for causes seems inadequate as the cure for the actual ills currently plaguing African Studies. Not only is this proposition based on a rather narrow, positivistic notion of the academic endeavor, it also reveals a very selective view of the wide range of disciplines that together form the vast field of African Studies. In other words, while Basedau’s prescription might be beneficial in resolving specific practical problems, it is quite unproductive when it comes to rethinking and reconfiguring African Studies – in the “big picture.”

Basedau’s desire to “promote further progress” by identifying causes (2020: 199) thus seems problematic, since it appears to be a rehearsal of earlier paternalistic attempts by outsiders to “explain” Africa and prescribe their solutions, as exemplified in the extractivist colonial logic so cogently described by Tilley (2011). Causal reasoning is even more troublesome in the context of Africa due to the historical baggage of statistical models that present race as a cause. Such empirical research has tended to reify race, turning causal or inferential models into a form of racial reasoning (Zuberi, 2008). It is therefore strange indeed that Basedau would consider causes and effects without addressing power differentials and the modes of sociopolitical and cultural relationalities that are in themselves causes and effects thereof. Why would power relations not be relevant in identifying problems and working toward designing policies to ameliorate said problems? What

kinds of progress can be envisioned through knowledge production processes if colonial and epicolonial power imbalances and systemic injustices are not identified and evaluated, coupled with ethical responsibility?

Again, we do not deny that there are instances where the search for causes and effects might indeed prove adequate. Yet, the project of rethinking African Studies should be concerned with a much broader agenda of exploring and analyzing the multiplicity of African and African diasporic lifeworlds. Shifting the research focus toward the continuous relational processes that bring these lifeworlds into being would be more productive and indeed more appropriate. As Spies and Seesemann have argued in their case for taking a relational perspective, such an analytical focus is “capable of accommodating the entire range of options together with the concomitant power structures, constraints, and inequalities” (2016: 136).

The epigraph to this section by material feminist Karen Barad underscores the added value of the study of relations. Even if her ontological premise that *relata* do not preexist relations may be debatable, Barad’s notion of intra-action between cause and effect, and thus the shift of the focus to relationality, “constitutes a reworking of the traditional notion of causality” (Barad, 2007: 140); a reworking that should be a major source of inspiration for any attempt to rethink African Studies.

Critical African Studies or Comparative Area (African) Studies?

Toward the end of his article, Basedau proceeds to propose Comparative African Studies, or CAS, as the way forward and invites others to join this initiative. His version of CAS piggybacks on Comparative Area Studies, which appears to have developed into GIGA’s flagship approach over the past few years. While it is reasonable for researchers based at an area studies institution to insist on the value of comparison and to present this enterprise in terms of overhauling previous approaches, we doubt that it will provide an effective response to current challenges in African Studies.

Basedau’s promotion of comparison as the singular answer to his four challenges reveals limitations similar to his advocacy of causality, as outlined above. It also begs a number of questions, including but not limited to the following: What is “Africa” being compared with? Are intra-African comparisons to be undertaken? Or comparisons to other formerly colonized spaces and societies, such as the Caribbean, South America, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, or New Zealand, for example? Are there comparisons to be made between “Africa” and former colonizers and their historical frames of advancement, which still have bearing today in representations and discussions of African modernities, histories, and levels of developmental progress? Whose definitions of modernity and progress are being accessed to set up frames of comparison, and to what ends?

Before we lay out our own vision of Critical rather than Comparative African Studies, let us take a closer look at the arguments on which Basedau builds his case for comparison. His first concern is the surmounting of a hegemonic “Western” perspective, which he sees as unilateral and external to African contexts:

First, comparison can also help us overcome a one-sided, outside (particularly Western) view. If we compare—or, better, combine—different perspectives, we may be able to provide a more nuanced picture. Contradicting views can be put to the test, revealing what better matches multi-faceted realities. (2020: 201)

However, it remains unclear how the comparative contemplation of contradicting views helps overcome the limitations of one-sided views. Wouldn't this require an epistemic shift and a critical questioning of the "white gaze" (Pailey, 2019)? Also, Basedau's undifferentiated reading of "Western" perspectives is quite remarkable here, given the fact that they are in and of themselves multifarious, with African Studies scholarship being produced by African scholars in diasporic contexts of "Western" geopolitical spaces.

Basedau further claims that comparison can serve as a corrective to sweeping representations of Africa:

Second, [...] Comparative African Studies will be useful to correct the often undifferentiated and mostly negative views on Africa. Comparing different African countries and subnational units of analysis will quickly reveal many differences along with more positive examples and promising trends. (2020: 201)

Yet, isn't the best way to correct undifferentiated views of Africa to stop relegating the African archive to the margins? Rather than Western scholarship determining what is "positive" and defining what is "promising", don't we need engaged, critical scholarship by (continental and diasporic) African and non-African researchers who take up the challenge of decoloniality? Still, Basedau is convinced that adopting comparative approaches in German research contexts will bulk out the field:

Third, by adding "comparative" to "African Studies" or "Area Studies," we can also strengthen a field in which social sciences still form the minority, at least in the German university landscape. (2020: 201)

He does not tell us, however, how German African Studies as a whole can benefit from comparative approaches when they are read as a means to compensate for the purported minoritization of the social sciences.

Against Basedau's advocacy of a comparative framework meant to resonate with his four challenges, we set out a decolonial agenda to work toward the reconfiguration of African Studies, an agenda that makes the long overdue move from what V.Y. Mudimbe famously called the "colonial library" to the African archive and that is built on decolonial perspectives and methodologies.

This rich African archive is not only essential in laying the foundation for Critical African Studies, but also capable of addressing some of Basedau's challenges. For example, in his *Social Science as Imperialism* (1979), the political scientist Claude Ake addressed a number of concerns about the comparative approach to African Studies, particularly pointing to the problem of the embedded white gaze. In his

seminal 1996 study *Citizens and Subjects*, Mahmood Mamdani warned about the problem of writing the history of Africa through “analogy.” More recently, Pailey (2019) advocated decentering the white gaze with specific reference to development studies. All these works problematize comparative approaches as promoted by Basedau. We posit Critical African Studies rather than Comparative African Studies as much better suited to rethinking and reconfiguring African Studies. Apart from necessary decolonial perspectives, the African archive takes center stage in this endeavor. It also needs to include the traditions from the Black diaspora, which have been consistently contesting Eurocentrism and projecting African agency in knowledge production. In this archive, Africa emerges as a voice to be heard rather than a problem to be solved.

Critical African Studies can draw on the African archive to address even the issues of *longue durée* and concerns about “micro” as opposed to “macro” raised by Basedau. We invoke here Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi’s *A Thousand Years of West African History* (1965), which tackled the question of *longue durée* in African history more than half a century ago. Similarly, the expansive scholarship of Ali A. Mazrui and Samir Amin is exemplary in dealing with macro issues pertaining to Africa, and is indicative of the rich output generated from Africa by African scholars. This output goes back to the dawn of political independence and even beyond, and it keeps on flowing, with institutions like the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) leading the way.

At the same time, the response to current challenges in African Studies cannot be limited to giving the African archive – of which we have only scratched the Anglophone surface here – the place it deserves. It needs to be coupled with a turn to decolonial epistemologies. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) poignantly observed, if the problem of the 20th century was the “color line” (W.E.B. Dubois, 1903), it has mutated to the “epistemic line” as the problem of the 21st century.

We are aware that the promotion of decolonial scholarship has recently become commonplace in certain academic contexts, to the extent that the precise contours and the practical consequences of decoloniality have become blurred. For example, Christopher Clapham recently observed “such a diverse and confusing range of claims that it becomes difficult to disentangle what “decolonising African studies” actually means” (2020: 138). At the same time, the proliferation of decolonial projects has given rise to warnings about the tendency of simply jumping on the “decolonial bandwagon” (Moosavi, 2020). If we want to avert this danger, and if we are serious about Critical African Studies, it will require more robust epistemological and practical interventions.

This entails the necessity of scrutinizing Global North scholarship’s relations to African epistemologies and of engendering rigorous engagements with intersectional inequalities. We need to foreground sociopolitical phenomena ensuing from colonial and epicolonial marginalizations that are intertwined with gendered, racialized, epistemic, religious, ethnolinguistic, and embodied hierarchies. These dimensions of epistemic decolonization cannot be eschewed in serious attempts to rethink African Studies (Auma et al., 2020: 345–350; Kessi et al., 2020: 275; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021:

14). Several pioneering Black intersectional scholars rooted in African continental and diasporic contexts, most notably Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (with Sirma Bilge, 2018), Amina Mama (2017), and Sylvia Tamale (2020), have demonstrated the necessity of addressing intersectional oppressions alongside discussions of colonial and epicolonial power differentials.

As a related analytical approach, critical diversity literacy posits that changing environments and research contexts require new skills from those who have attained high levels of education and leadership positions as educators, researchers, and public intellectuals within their respective fields. Researchers then need to move beyond the constraints of a single history and understand human reality as multi-perspectival, relational, historicized, context-bound, and structured through power hierarchies (Steyn, 2015: 381–388). Both intersectionality and critical diversity approaches are intrinsic to decolonial scholarship; providing necessary vocabularies, grammars, and translation tools for the comprehension and articulation of sociopolitical hierarchies, institutionalized power relations, and affective and cultural economies as regards all levels social organization. Indeed, all three fields of scholarship are interwoven in their investments in rethinking, unlearning, and re-visioning the practices and politics of knowledge production.

We thus propose to pursue the central decolonial concerns of Critical African Studies, powerfully encapsulated by Kessi et al., as political and ethical practices of “unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces, networks and ways of knowing that transcend our epicolonial inheritance” (2020: 271). The four modes of decolonizing identified by the same authors – structural, epistemic, personal, and relational (ibid. 273–275) – strike us as timely direct responses to Basedau’s four challenges, meriting deeper engagement. They can be paraphrased as follows:

- *Structural decolonizing* entails the redistribution of material resources and opportunities, which are currently distributed in ways that replicate colonial relations and power structures benefitting academic “insiders” from the Global North. Such resources include professional recognition through tenure track jobs and titles, leadership and gatekeeping roles, scholarships, research funding, and budgets, admissions, and integration into institutions. This mode of decolonization requires considering intersectional inequalities concerning Black women and women of color among other vulnerable groups (e.g. LGBTQI and disabled communities), who are marginalized (and often tokenized) in academic precarity.
- *Epistemic decolonization* concerns the reclaiming of worldviews and epistemologies not entrenched in, nor oriented around Euro-American theorization. The pivot of epistemological decolonization is rejecting the notion that scholarly knowledge is inherently and necessarily rational, objective, and universal – a claim grounded in the European Age of Enlightenment. The focus of attention needs to be redirected to include questions of subjectivity and situatedness of dehumanized and erased positions, to be addressed through thick scholarship that enables unlearning

and delinking from epicolonial thought processes and practices, while questioning the power structures undergirding these.

- *Personal decolonization* focuses on the cultivation of occupational consciousness and commitment to counter Global North hegemony and to override white privilege in knowledge production processes. Such commitment entails identifying, assessing, and resisting power structures where identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class are implemented as markers of subservience and subjugation.
- *Relational decolonization* recognizes human agency and interdependence in structures, epistemologies, and (inter)actions. Knowledge production processes are dependent on human relations, which are organized and influenced by power hierarchies. Consistent critical engagement working against the grain of current modes of privilege must engage with intersectional inequalities. This mode of decolonization requires white-positioned European and North American scholars to go the extra mile, to catch up with African-led debates, indigenous knowledge processes, and public discourses for the purposes of listening, dialogue, and the active generation and practice of equality and reciprocity. Contingent on this is the realization that much of white-positioned Global North scholarship has been embedded in extractivist, commodifying, or co-opted methods of knowledge production.¹⁷

While not dismissive of the potential value of comparative approaches based on critical social scientific perspectives, we posit the necessity of an epistemic shift in African Studies as a precondition for any meaningful engagement with the decolonial challenge. Reaffirming Basedau's invitation "Let's get to it!" (2020: 203), we adapt, by way of conclusion, one of Mao Zedong's revolutionary adages: There is turmoil in the world of letters, and the prospects are excellent!

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Notes

1. One notable example are Black women scholars and LGBTQI Black scholars from continental and diasporic contexts who have emphasized the necessity for intersectional approaches in African Studies. (See Imam et al., 1997; Mama, 2017; Nyeck, 2020; Tamale, 2020, among others).
2. (See, for instance, Apoh and Lundt, 2013; Auma et al., 2020; Blackshire-Belay, 1992; Eggers et al., 2018; Opitz et al., 1992).
3. (See Hooks, 2009: 124; Ogot, 1992: 71; Tamale, 2020: 7, 36).
4. Kessi et al. (2020: 272).
5. “Erklärung zum Austritt von Prof. Jürgen Zimmerer, Hamburg”, Letter to the VAD members by Hans Peter Hahn on behalf of the board, distributed via email as VAD Newsletter, May 24, 2019.
6. Ibid.
7. See <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/institute/giga-institut-für-afrika-studien/#Team>; last accessed 19 December 2020.
8. For a deeper understanding of the marginalization of Black scholars in African Studies, see Auma et al. (2020: 335–337).
9. This begs the question of how research undertaken by white-positioned Global North scholars will benefit their research subjects and the communities they have studied. See further Chilisa (2020).
10. A couple of recent examples of such knowledge production strands are the UN Decade for People of African Descent 2015–2024 and the #Afrozensus online survey in 2020. See United Nations (n.d.); ADEFRA (n.d.); the Afrozensus can be found at <https://afrozensus.de/?lang=en> (last accessed 13 January 2021).
11. (See Adomako Ampofo, 2016; Auma et al., 2020; Kamunge et al., 2018; Kessi et al., 2020; Pailey, 2019; Tamale, 2020, among others).
12. Weber (1904: 30) (our translation from German).
13. The African feminist scholars Ayesha Imam, Fatou Sow, and Amina Mama had already emphasized the necessity of rethinking epistemic responsibility in their seminal 1997 edited volume *Engendering African Social Sciences*, where they stringently challenge the Western-oriented androcentricity of the social sciences. In her introduction, Imam succinctly states: “Central to our gender analytic approach is concern for Africa. We are Africa-centred. It is Africa and African women and men who are at the centre of what and how and why we do research, and to whom we have a political commitment and feel a responsibility more specific and personal than our general responsibility to humanity” (Imam 1997: 16).
14. See also Harding’s discussion of four definitions of Western objectivity, one of which is aligned with certain knowledge-seeking communities as including or excluding “members of different classes, races and/or genders, or that maximize adversarial relations of rigorous criticism of ideas and claims, or that maximize ideal speech conditions, etc.” (1995: 333).
15. Barad (2007: 389).

16. For a good overview of the incongruities at play here, see Mahoney and Goertz (2006). In her pivotal contribution to decolonizing research methodologies, Chilisa (2020) offers nuanced discussions of qualitative and quantitative methods. See in particular chapters 6–8 (“Decolonizing Evaluation”, 114–146; “Decolonizing Mixed Methods Research”, 147–168; “Indigenous Mixed Methods in Program Evaluation”, 169–184).
17. This summary is based on Kessi et al. (2020: 273–275). The four modes of decolonization enunciated here stand in relation to each other and are reflected in Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s “10 Ds” of the decolonial turn: decanonization, deimperialization, depatriarchalization, deracialization, de-disciplining, deprovincialization, debourgeoisement, decorporatization, democratization, dehierarchization (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021: 3).

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Afrikastudien in Bedrängnis: Die deutsche Afrikawissenschaft und die vernachlässigte dekoloniale Herausforderung

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag ist eine Replik auf den Artikel von Matthias Basedau, der in Ausgabe 55/2020 der vorliegenden Zeitschrift erschienen ist. Während die Afrikawissenschaften im Begriff sind, überkommene Debatten hinter sich zu lassen, scheinen manche Strömungen innerhalb des Feldes in Deutschland intellektuelle Beiträge herausragender afrikanischer und nichtafrikanischer Forscherinnen und Forscher nicht wahrzunehmen. Es ist frappierend, wie Basedau teils dieselben Defizite reproduziert, auf die er aufmerksam machen will, etwa die Dominanz der Afrikastudien durch Arbeiten und Personen von außerhalb des Kontinents oder die Konstruktion Afrikas als einen Ort, dem es an vielem mangelt. Dies unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit einer Dekolonisierung der Afrikastudien auf vielen Ebenen, etwa durch ihre Befreiung aus der Zwangsjacke der Regionalstudien, das Hinterfragen vermeintlich objektiver Wissenschaft und die Öffnung für dekoloniale Ansätze. Die Beschränkung auf vergleichende Perspektiven wird hingegen dafür sorgen, dass die Afrikawissenschaften in einer epistemologischen Sackgasse stecken bleiben.

Schlagwörter

Afrikastudien, Wissensproduktion, Dekolonialität