



Call for applications

MIASA-PAPA International Colloquium

Challenging Conflict Research in Africa: Epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues

10 - 12 December 2021 at the University of Ghana, Accra*

In recent years, the social sciences have been crossed by a major questioning movement of scientific discourse on Africa. The inventory of the colonial library, decolonial thought, and the decoding of the contents of the “black boxes” that are the most commonly used concepts in the social sciences constitute various declinations of this ambition to reappropriate a science of Africa that was built without this continent. The conference *Rethinking Politics from Conflicts in Africa* is part of this renewal of African social sciences. This conference is organized by the Fellows of the African Postdoctoral Pilot Academy (PAPA), a program of excellence that brings together fifteen postdoctoral students from various African higher education and research institutions. It is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education in Research and is organized in cooperation with MIASA in Accra (Ghana), Point Sud in Bamako (Mali), the University of Basel (Switzerland) as well as the University of Frankfurt (Germany).

Context and Justification

The epithets used to describe social conflicts taking place on the African continent, the descriptions made of them, and the perspectives applied to them contribute more to obscure rather than further our understanding and the careful questioning of social violence. This observation is not limited to the field of conflict studies in Africa. The salvage critique undertaken by various authors over the last few decades continues to challenge the mode of researching African contexts.

This criticism concerns both the dimension of the relationship to the object, as Mudimbe (1988) pointed out, revealing "the Western epistemological order" which structures the "scientific representations" of

Africa and imposes criteria of intelligibility, as well as on the conceptual mechanisms in charge of local histories which want to be universal invariants, the African specificities being highlighted only through a posture of "essentialising practices concepts" (Ouédraogo, 1997). As Macamo (2018) rightly reminds us, the danger is that most of these concepts function as "black boxes" whose apparent success poorly hides the assumptions of which they are the products and, consequently, the preconceptions they convey.

Generally inscribed in unquestioned theoretical and methodological frameworks, the perspectives engaged in many studies of conflict in Africa consist of explaining why African countries encounter difficulties in becoming "States" like others, i.e., like "the model" that Western history has produced. Instead of questioning how in African contexts or elsewhere groups and individuals make society, perpetuate or question local agreements and understandings, affirm or contest values or benchmarks of collective life, we have often endeavoured to explain "deviations" from norms, "failures" and "anomalies" concerning expected performances. In this way, we believe we are exempt from questioning the local forms of construction of political legitimacies. When we do venture there, however, we do so by often framing the issues based on a fortress of consecrated concepts and theories. For this reason, our procedures may lack the necessary critical edge.

Thus, theoretical reflection has regularly been nourished by some analytical categories considered essential to the understanding of politics. These include "citizenship", "democracy", "governance", "civil society", among others. However, there is no challenge to the operational value of these concepts, the contexts to which they are applied, and no taking into account of the possible variation of the meaning of these concepts according to the contexts.

In this respect, rigorous and uncompromising questioning of the theories that have so far claimed to account for conflicts in Africa is a prerequisite for opening up avenues of reflection more concerned with the agreement between facts and theories. The difficulties of such an undertaking are significant. Indeed, the "obvious" established by a long tradition of social sciences in analyzing the political phenomenon in Africa seems to exempt researchers from an interrogation starting from the object and not from a preconceived idea of it. Getting rid of these apparent facts implies a sustained questioning of the theoretical models that give them coherence and impose them as unavoidable categories of scientific analysis.

Of course, it is not a question of wiping the slate clean of the common scientific heritage. Rather, we should revisit the theoretical and conceptual frameworks involved in thinking about the phenomena of conflict in African contexts. If theories on the State in Africa have sufficiently highlighted "dysfunctions" and pronounced verdicts on the "decay", "failure" and "bankruptcy" of the State, there has been minimal questioning of these phenomena for their own sake, just as there has been little interest in questioning the sources of what was hitherto held to be public peace. What can taking into account the "forgotten" dimensions contribute to the understanding of conflicts in Africa? And above all, how can they be reinserted into conflict analysis projects and what forms of theoretical and conceptual revision are indispensable?

Therefore, this colloquium's objective is fundamentally epistemological and is deployed on three main aspects on which the proposals could focus:

1/ Identities, historicities, alterity

By caricaturing individuals and conflicts, analysts have sometimes become accustomed to assessing phenomena in Africa in the short, rather than in the long term. This raises the question of how researchers

who "objectify" African contexts think about the values of the "other", values in which they do not participate or share. The proposal should focus on the use of concepts in African conflict studies, the deployment of a theoretical model of analysis or interpretation, or the critique of a specific work. For this first strand, then, applicants are encouraged to examine how the political object is constructed in African contexts, the assumptions on which this construction rests, and how the deployed concepts impose a certain intelligibility on phenomena.

2/ Broadening the field of observation

For the second part, applicants are invited to focus more directly on how a theoretical renewal of the analysis of politics and conflict in African contexts can reopen the space for interpreting facts, producing facts that have been rendered invisible or irrelevant by the usual theoretical frameworks, or forging new analytical perspectives that have not been thought about. The ambition is to open up the object of conflict by placing it within the more global dynamics of transformation of African societies. Indeed, analyses that restrict the study of conflicts to the most immediate motives and expressions of conflictual elements lose sight of the overall configuration within which specific dimensions are essential, but "silent". Seeing, describing and showing the links of these dimensions with the conflict phenomenon requires theoretical audacity. Applicants are encouraged to be daring in their proposals. It means thinking, for example, about land conflicts concerning transformations in education, family structure, food culture, techniques and technologies, etc., some of which seem far removed from the immediate object, and showing how this broadening of perspective allows for a better understanding of the phenomena.

3/ The voice of fire that is heard, hear the voice of water

Birago DIOP poetically prescribed a particular disposition to understand the specificities of Africa that a form of rationality had reduced to irrationality. One could take up these concerns that the poet expressed in literature in the social sciences. From experience, one of the limits of our studies is often not knowing what to do with what we sometimes discover in the field because our measuring instruments are not calibrated to accommodate them. To get an idea of this, we need only think of our neglect of ordinary situations in people's lives to focus on the most official contexts and actors corresponding to our idea of "resource persons", important subjects or key actors. These approaches, which constitute limits to our research, should encourage us to reflect on how to integrate and bring the unexpected into our inquiries. Furthermore, in this third section, applicants are encouraged to emphasize the methodological added value that a fundamental consideration of the characteristics of local contexts could bring to the researcher. This could be done through a discussion, starting from concrete and specific cases, of the modes of engagement of the procedures, techniques, tools by which the researchers question the political phenomenon and, particularly, the conflicts, adjustments, reconstructions, reinventions that these engagements have called or could have called for. And consequently, the contribution that this reactivation of the attention to the object can constitute in the research on conflicts.

Selected References

Macamo Elisio, « Translating Black-boxes: the social sciences and Africa », in Ouédraogo, J-B., Diawara, M., Macamo, E. (Editors), *Translation revisited: Contesting the Sense of African social realities*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp 335-352.

Mudimbe Valentin-Yves, *The Invention of Africa, Philosophy, Gnosis and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.

Ouédraogo Jean-Bernard, *Violences et communautés en Afrique noire*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997.

Conditions for application

Send a proposal of no more than 500 words, in English or French, including a biographical note, by **October 1st, 2021 to the following e-mail address:**

papa.miasa.conferenceaccra2021@gmail.com

The proposal should indicate the chosen focus and the title of the paper and include a summary of the context and problem. A biographical note indicating the author's discipline and institutional affiliation is also required.

Note: Those interested in submitting a paper proposal must fulfil the condition of being at least post-doctoral scholars and are asked to complete the following online form:

<https://my.forms.app/form/610a7b63a3f6e60d5103512c>

For any question please contact the secretary of steering committee: Dr. Tangara Mahamadou Bassirou, Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako (Mali)

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Practical aspects

All costs related to travel and accommodation in Accra of the accepted speakers will be covered. Early career researchers are particularly encouraged to propose a conference paper. Proposals may be submitted in English or French.

Schedule

- August 30th 2021: call for proposals
- October 1st 2021: proposals' submission deadline
- October 11th 2021: selection of proposals and communication to authors
- November 30th 2021: submission of presentation papers
- 10th – 12th December 2021: Colloquium in Accra

*** Important: Depending on the development of the corona situation, the date or place may change.**

Organizers

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