

# **Inaugural CODESRIA/CASB Summer School in African Studies and Area Studies in Africa. Interdisciplinary and Methodological Challenges in Area Studies**

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## **Introduction**

The first CODESRIA/CASB Summer School on „Interdisciplinary and Methodological Challenges in African Studies” held in Dakar from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015 brought together 13 young African and European scholars and four senior resource persons from Africa and Europe. The laureates were selected on a competitive basis following a joint call issued by CODESRIA’s Department for Grants and Training and the Centre for African Studies of the University of Basel. Applications were reviewed jointly by a CODESRIA and a CASB review panel out of a total of 110 submissions covering in the main almost all social science and humanities disciplines. The selected cohort retained sociology, social anthropology, philosophy, political science, literature, religious studies and international relations. Laureates came from the following African countries: Mozambique, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroun, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Uganda and Ghana and Switzerland:

- Onja Arimanana Rian’aina Razafimandimby Rabarihoela
- Achille Kouhon
- Prince Karakire Guma
- Serge Bernard Aliana
- Adwoa Owusuaa Bobie
- Moussa Thior
- Nestor Zante
- Constâncio Samuel Paulo Nguja
- Alassane Aliou Mbaye
- John Kojo Aggrey
- Maïke Anna Birzle
- Susann Ludwig
- Joschka Philipps

The resource team covered philosophy, social anthropology and sociology and consisted of the following senior scholars:

- Elísio Macamo
- Ralph Weber
- Nkolo Foe
- Francis Nyamjoh

## **The Summer School**

The Summer School set itself the task of discussing Interdisciplinary and Methodological Challenges in Area Studies bearing on knowledge production in and on Africa. The School was organized around keynote addresses by the resource persons (in the morning) and the discussion of the individual projects of the doctoral students. On the first day of the School

Elísio Macamo, the course director, introduced the topic with an address on Interdisciplinarity in African Studies. His main argument was that what we know is also a function of how we know which means, in other words, that the organization of knowledge is not inherent to knowledge itself, but rather the result of historical, political and social choices made by individuals. The disciplines as we know them have a genealogy that is connected to European imperial expansion such that what has come to be known as knowledge of Africa can only be rendered intelligible within that particular history. In this sense, the main challenge that scholars studying Africa face in terms of interdisciplinarity is both to create critical spaces from within which they can challenge knowledge claims and their validation as well as looking for conceptual languages that can enable them to speak across and within disciplines, even to the point where they may collapse disciplinary boundaries.

On the second day of the School Nkolo Foé introduced participants to Epistemological Issues in African Philosophy and their Relevance to Theory. He focused his attention on postcolonial critiques which, he argued, are hostile to all forms of holistic social explanations and are based on a cultural and linguistic idealism which makes them particularly apt to provide a foundation for knowledge production on Africa free of all forms of ethnocentrism. His major methodological suggestions boiled down to, first, the idea that accounts of social phenomena must be sensitive to the relationship between the social actor and the context within which he or she pursues life, especially in connection with the extent to which the social actor can influence the context or is rendered powerless by it. Secondly, he pointed to the importance of the question concerning the goals of research, i.e. whether research should simply produce accounts of the world or, rather, produce knowledge to change the world.

Ralph Weber gave his keynote address on the third day of the Summer School. It bore on concepts and the importance which a grounded reflection over them has to research. His main message was that concepts need to be distinguished from words (terms) as they constitute images or ideas that go beyond proper names while at the same time resisting reduction to empirical reality. He indicated that philosophers are not agreed on the concept of concept with most converging on the view that concepts cannot really be defined. From the point of view of the School his claim that concepts are not in the text, but rather are claimed to be there by researchers was very important, for it drew attention to the pitfalls of conceptualisation in research. The talk raised issues around research as the translation of words into concepts as well as the intelligibility of any discursive description of reality.

Francis Nyamjoh addressed the challenge of methodology by, first, discussing at length the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches in social science research. He pointed to the problems of quantification which as a procedure tend to privilege theoretical frameworks over empirical reality and are not sufficiently sensitive to the plurality of stories that can be told about the social world. He drew attention to the fact that research can be understood as an extended conversation on a Socratic world, i.e. a way of engaging with the world that is not necessarily concerned with scientifically established criteria for validity, but rather with the ways in which we talk intelligibly about the world.

All keynote addresses were followed by discussions during which participants were able either to ask questions or make extended commentaries. In the afternoon sessions the discussion of the individual projects assigned to the respective session (theory, concepts, methods) drew from the insights of the morning session to address the weaknesses and strengths of the projects.

The final session (with Elísio Macamo) consisted of exercises that encouraged the participants to think through the methodological, conceptual and theoretical implications of their work. The session was on “theory construction”. It used an idiosyncratic definition of “theory” as the process of making sense of data or rendering it intelligible.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Summer School went very well. The atmosphere was friendly and collegial. The laureates were very good, articulate and very active. The teaching team was also good. The only shortcoming, perhaps, was that it was all male. The laureates generally found the School good, but asked for more time to be allocated to the discussion of the individual projects. Some pointed out that some discussions were perhaps too abstract and they had to struggle to follow them.

It was a very good first joint School. The next one, which is scheduled for 2016, should aim at keeping the standards high. This will entail early preparation, including launching of the call and selection of participants and resource persons. If it were not for the need to strike a gender balance, the team that taught at the Inaugural School could actually be kept for the coming sessions.