



Newsletter 2/2022

REPORT: SECOND EUROPEAN STUDENTS' CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN STUDIES, SESCAS (BASEL, 31.08.–02.09.2022)

■ RALUCA MARCU, XIAO MENG, VEIT ARLT, THE SESCAS TEAM, AND PARTICIPANTS

At the end of August 2022, 72 young scholars from more than ten European (from Romania to Portugal and from Sweden to Sardinia) and African countries (DRC and Cameroon, not mentioning the African students from European universities) convened at the University of Basel for the *Second European Students' Conference on African Studies (SESCAS)*.



The SESCAS team had selected 24 papers organized in eight thematic panels. In addition, there were two keynote addresses, three workshops, side events, and ample time for socializing. The organizers had originally intended to avoid parallel sessions but in the end could not entirely avoid them. Sharing their feedback, some participants would have liked to catch all sessions.

The first day was memorable with its networking, visiting and group activities, but also the different exhibitions. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

On the first day, a workshop challenging internalized imaginaries in African Studies assisted participants to get to know each other (pictures: Ivana Kočišová 2022).





In his compositions, jazz musician Benjamin Jephta (Cape Town) engages with the complex identity politics of South Africa. He delivered a captivating keynote (picture: Ivana Kočišová 2022).

The organizers dedicated the first day to networking, allowing all present to get to know each other and the site of the conference, connecting to the space the SESCAS team had created for them. Participants rallied at the conference venue, registered, and enjoyed the welcome coffee before they got a guided tour of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien or a guided tour discussing African issues in the Basel city scape. This was followed by the workshop *Learning to Unlearn. Challenging Internalized Imaginaries in African Studies* led by Danielle Isler, an alumna of the Masters' program in African Studies at the University of Basel and now PhD student at the University of Bayreuth. A keynote address presented by Randin Nicolas, head of the Analysis and Policy Division of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), rounded off this first day. This keynote was organized by the students from the Masters' program *Études africaines* at the University of Geneva was followed by a reception.

It was enriching both for meeting other scholars and also on a personal level. SESCAS organizers have made the right choice of participants. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

The second day of the conference was about *us* (i.e. students in African Studies), about our identity, fluidity, and understanding who we are. The day was introduced by the keynote *Born coloured—not born free* by South African jazz musician Benjamin Jephta who in his compositions explores the complexity of identities in South Africa today.

Ellen Sow (left, organizing team) with some of the participants from African Studies programs all over Europe (picture: Ivana Kočišová 2022).



Panel one focussed on gender, non-normative relations, and the critique of heteronormativity within African Studies, while panel two explored what it means to be a woman in African societies today. In the afternoon, participants had the choice between a poster workshop and visiting exhibition displays. They then joined a *Living Library* session organized by Emanuel Brito revolving around African identities and experiences in Switzerland.

Then it was time to seize the warm summer evening and explore the town under the guidance of the local students.

The final moment, when we all said goodbye hoping to meet again in the future (...) was the most emotional for me because we felt everyone's wish to continue interacting, learning from each other, and not to end this experience with a simple goodbye. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

The final day of the conference was intended to connect all the remaining dots, encouraging the participants to keep in touch in future. The parallel panel sessions covered topics ranging from geopolitics, global health, artistic practices, ecology, archives, to memories of resistance. All these panels were generally moderated by younger scholars (i.e. doctoral students and postdoc fellows) in order to keep the hierarchies flat and make students comfortable.

[My personal take home message is] from Henri Michel Yéré's advice: "sustain this contact/bond, collaborate moving forward, do stuff together..." (anonymous feedback from a participant)

The final plenary, then, was fittingly introduced by Henri Michel Yéré, the first graduate of the African Studies program and today postdoc fellow at the Centre for African Studies Basel. He recalled his experience of the first *European Students' Conference on African Studies* held in Basel fifteen years ago and related how that event shaped sustained personal and intellectual networks. He encouraged the attendees to keep in touch and carry the momentum forward. This idea reverberated well with all participants who then split into groups to discuss their conference experience. When reporting to the plenary, the wish that the *European Students' Conference on African Studies* should be institutionalised, was clearly put on the agenda.

I enjoyed everything, however, if I had to choose, I will say my most memorable moment was the last event (the dinner and live music). The presentations were over, so everyone was more relaxed and we were able to mingle and simply have fun. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

During this closing session a thunderstorm broke loose, which flooded the basement of the building and thus the Versobar, i.e. the venue of the conference dinner. Luckily the firebrigade and the students managing the venue were able to dry out the place and, by the time the plenary ended, the premises were in a good state again. Accompanied by the sound of Benjamin Jephtha's quartet, participants enjoyed drinks before the sumptuous Ethiopian buffet prepared by Afrolicious was opened.

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE (XIAO MENG, SESCOAS TEAM)

At the end, we finally made it. The moment when we took photos with the participants, that kind of feeling was hard to express in one word. If allowed only one sentence, I would like to say: it was worth it!

I did not have any expectations coming in, other than meeting new people, presenting my topic, and exchanging ideas. However, this three days' conference turned out to be the best experience (beyond academics) of my life. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

As masters' students, honestly, I think, we are not defined as formal members of the academic research community. We are learners, we are the backup army. Some of us will take up a job in the industry in the future—maybe related to Africa, maybe not.

Gratitude was written big in this conference, which offered a beautiful and safe space for all participants (picture: Ivana Kočišová 2022).



THANK
YOU

3

Some of us will try to stay in the academic world. All the experience gained during the masters' study period prepares us to take decisions on our future. Our motivation for this conference was to offer students the opportunity to share their ideas and achievements. In this regard, I think we were successful. I hope in the end, the conference allowed all our participants to have the feeling of academic exchange.

With regard of the whole process of organizing a conference, I think the most impressive part is the importance of generosity and humanity of the conference organizers towards the participants. In this regard, adequate support by our funders and the university allowed us to make a difference, supporting participants who were lacking sufficient funds for accommodation and travel, assisting African participants to get their visa, and levying modest registration fees. Before this conference, I was not aware this might be possible and was discouraged to join international conferences. How could I possibly afford the air ticket? How could I get the visa? How could I afford the living expenses in a high-income country? It is the conference organizer who, ideally, connects various resource providers, makes the impossible possible, and connects minds.

However, in the year-long process we also experienced some hard times. From a super ambitious plan to a smaller but executable project, there were so many rounds of discussion marked by anger, tears, and frustration but also by laughter. Teamwork is never simply a slogan. All of us were working part time on the project and had to deal with heavy study tasks. For the success of such a project, mutual understanding is of greatest importance—a big thank you to all my teammates!

THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUES (RALUCA-MARIA MARCU, SESCAS TEAM)

Being part of the organizing team of the *Second European Students' Conference on African Studies* was definitely both challenging and beneficial on various levels. Nothing would have worked without a strong set of core-values. For us, one of the key principles was to engage with students around the globe, trying to break the barriers imposed by studying in Europe, which sometimes implies the bias of researching from a European point of view.

Another important aspect of our work was to find balance. We wanted to provide access to valuable academic knowledge and to create a lasting network of students (i.e. future scholars) interested in African Studies, while at the same time facilitating a suitable dynamic where students would feel safe, heard, appreciated, and, in the end, encouraged to continue their research. But in order to achieve this balance, we needed external help. We could not do it without our former colleagues', facilitators', and moderators' direct and indirect input.

Thus, only two months after we said "good-bye for now" to the SESCAS participants, I realize how many important lessons are grounded in this experience, inasmuch as there is no success in working alone. The "success" is definitely not limited to SESCAS alone, but pertains to any single aspect of tackling academic and non-academic issues.



Exhausted but relieved and happy at the end of the three days' conference: Organizing team member Raluca-Maria Marcu and volunteer Fabia Betschart (picture: Ivana Kočíšová 2022).

CHAPEAU, SESCAS-TEAM!

All I would like to add again is "big thanks again to you for organizing this amazing conference" and I hope another one will be organized in the near future. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

...I hope you will be able to organize it in the future for other students because it is a good forum for African students. I truly think it contributes to making African Studies less male, pale, and stale. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

You were all fantastic. You have all given us incredibly interesting days, full of good feelings, and friendships with incredible people that I hope I can cherish for life! Thank you team SESCAS. (anonymous feedback from a participant)

FUNDING

This project would not have been possible without adequate funding and we would like to thank the following donors for their generous support, allowing us to realize our potential and achieving our goal: the Swiss Academy of the Social Sciences and Humanities, the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft Basel, the Carl Schlettwein Stiftung, the Max Geldner Stiftung, the Swiss Society for African Studies and the Centre for African Studies, University of Basel.

Xiao Meng and **Raluca-Maria Marcu** both study for the Masters' in African Studies at the University of Basel. Contact: xiao.meng@unibas.ch; r.marcu@stud.unibas.ch.

Veit Arlt is the executive secretary of the Centre for African Studies and facilitated the project in the framework of a two semesters' course at the University of Basel. Contact: veit.arlt@unibas.ch.