



**„Conceptualising ‚Future‘. Current Debates in Regional and Systematic Research“
International Conference
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Welcoming Address Susan Arndt, *Second Director of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies*

What’s in a name? Like all committed parents, we had lengthy and intense discussions about how to name our brainchild. The list of suggested names was long, and the respective “pros and cons” were manifold. The name finally selected has become our banner: Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies.

So, what’s in this name? Set in the University of Bayreuth, and anchored in its Institute of African Studies, the beginning and the end of the name is self-explanatory: “Bayreuth” and “African Studies”. Bayreuth African Studies have been a strong pillar of research and academic training ever since the foundation of this University in 1975.

But why have we called this new structure an “Academy”? First of all, because we are eager to further promote, within the field of African Studies, existing standards of academic scholarship through a community of learning, exchange and debate. The commitment to “advanced” academic work – on the other hand – means, first and foremost, that we cannot be content with the standards already reached in our field. Rather, it is part and parcel of our credo that we constantly move forward and transcend limiting conventions in a purposeful way. In our view, to advance conceptually today, with regard to African Studies, means to realise that:

1. Africa is not an area that can be studied in isolation. The African continent is a geopolitical scape within a global scope that generates specific insights and dynamics of world-wide relevance;

2. Africa is entangled with African diasporas all around the globe;
3. Africa and its diasporas share entangled histories, presents and futures with other parts of the world in general and the *white* West in particular;
4. To pursue African Studies in an “advanced” way necessitates a scrutiny of the Africanist gaze, as Toni Morrison puts it. This self-reflexive approach gazes back onto a divisive past, to generate both memory and visions for a shared future.
5. The label “advanced” challenges any confinement to an isolated or self-isolating “Area Study”. The established antithesis between “Area Studies” here and systematic disciplines there has to be overcome. After all, do “Area Studies” not work systematically? And do what is being called “systematic disciplines” not find their empirical material in certain regions? There is no discipline that would not have to concentrate on particular empirical fields, just as much as there is no discipline that does not engage with systematic questions, i.e. theoretical debates, conceptual reflections and methodological considerations. Ultimately, area-based insights happen to be present in many disciplinary fields. They inform and enrich the immense theoretical and methodological pool of knowledge in the humanities and beyond.

In fact, these were the notions that our godparent, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, wanted to promote when agreeing to support the setting up of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. Today, its members represent about 20 disciplines, and among these are some with and some beyond a regional expertise in Africa and its diasporas. Dialogicity is now celebrated in various formats such as the five sub-projects and the working groups taking place each semester, as well as cultural events, workshops, and conferences like the one we are now opening.

Having found an appropriate name and having drafted a structure for the new institution, the most important ingredient still had to be developed: the subject of research. We had to discuss and find out: Which subject might have a regional home and yet a global agenda? How do time-related perspectives concur with area-related approaches, and how can they transcend the spatial fixation of the latter? Which subject, finally, would lend itself up for an encounter of a multitude of

disciplines, methodologies and theories? The title of this conference cuts a long story short, revealing the direction in which discussions eventually went. “The Future” had found us, the interdisciplinary Academy that studies Africa in context. And here we are, dedicating the Academy’s first phase of research to this topic: "Future Africa – Visions in Time".

A combination of ‘Africa’ and ‘future’ opens fields of thought and debate that are eagerly awaited in academia and beyond. Institutions of African studies as invented in the colonial past were not designed to pursue conceptualisations of the ‘future’ – and yet to do so, i.e. to approach conceptualisations of future, opens new routes into and visions for the future of the disciplines involved in African studies. Research on concepts of ‘Future’ in Africa and beyond is at the same time for us also a search for concepts for the future of the Bayreuth Academy itself.

But neither the future generally nor the future in or of Africa in particular are to the Academy’s fore. A cobbler should stick to his*her trade, and hence we, in the Academy, do not engage in attempts to predict the future. We prefer to leave this to those who study the future or “Futurologists” but remain interested in their concepts of the future – that often remain implicit in any case. Consequently, we pass by the question, as well, whether Africa might be in the future a carrier of the future. We will similarly not discuss whether Africa has – or: will have – a future. There is a simple reason for this. In an anti-Hegelian stance we simply affirm the existence of futures in and for Africa, without wasting any wit on this obvious issue. African contributions to world histories have written futures, and Africa and its diasporas will keep on generating futures.

Having said what we are not up to, here are a few words about what we eventually consider worth doing when approaching the subject ‘Future Africa’:

1. You might have noticed that we have decided to omit the definite article both in the title of our project and of this conference. We do so in order to stress that we do not assume to know what “the future” will be like. Even to speak of ‘Futures’ in the plural would not meet our notion that future performs rhizomically, that it keeps changing and remains opaque. Ultimately, language ends up with a construct; and we have decided to highlight this linguistic taming of the dynamic power of ‘Future’ by avoiding the definite article, and by writing ‘Future’ with a capital letter and/or placing it between quotation marks. Reading Future as a construct, the researchers at the Bayreuth Academy will engage with these processes of construction – the ideas,

conceptualisations and visions that keep framing it – as well as with the changing contexts in which these constructions emerge. Both futures of the past and futures yet to come are of interest to the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies.

2. We are primarily interested in conceptualisations and visions of “Future” generated in African societies and its diasporas. But we are equally interested to discuss African, African American and Afro-European conceptualisations of ‘Future’ in a comparative, transareal perspective with a keen interest to grasp the global pertinence, interactions and impact of those African and African-diasporic visions of Future and time.

Narratives about fears, hopes and risks will matter.

As you can see, we obviously have a regional or area-related focus on the African continent and its diasporas. However, this regional focus is contextualised and pursued transculturally or rather transareally, to employ Ottmar Ettes term once again. Moreover, this regional focus is in constant dialogue with systematic, i.e. with theoretical as well as methodological, considerations with regard to conceptualisations of ‘Future’. This dialogue is already well under way, notably through our first working group “Conceptualisations of Future”, which culminates in the present conference.