Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703-1750s)– Visions between Slavery and Enlightenment, between Europe and Africa

On November 22nd 2013, sub-project 4 of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies convened a workshop on Anton Wilhelm Amo, also known as „Antonius Guilielmus Amo Afer ab Aximo in Guinea”, Germany’s first Black philosopher. He contributed tremendously to the findings of the German and European Enlightenment and yet little is known about his life and work.

Since 1976 a few articles, books and a novel dedicated to Amo’s life and work have been published. Only since the early 2000th we have more elaborate information present with three monographs, published by Yawovi Emmanuel Edeh (2002), Jacob Emmanuel Mabe (2007) and Ottmar Ette (2014) that revisit, reassess and contextualise Amo’s life and work. The workshop aimed at discussing the state of the art in academic research and public memory, and to generate a research project/network that intensifies this debate. Susan Arndt and Peggy Piesche had invited experts such as Kwesi Aikins, Ottmar Ette, Jakob Mabe to share and discuss recent research findings in lectures and panel discussions, based on questions such as: Who was Anton Wilhelm Amo? What was his contribution to Enlightenment? What are his visions of future, his notions of freedom and social justice, and of philosophy? How are conventional perceptions of Enlightenment affected by the fact that one of its protagonists was of African origin, an enslaved person at that? How is Amo remembered in public memory and within academia? How is Anton Wilhelm Amo’s heritage perceived today, how is his persona and work discussed today? Which images and visions do inform the various writers and activists that revisit Amo? Are there similarities and differences between scientific debates in Germany, Europe and the rest of the world?

Looking back at Amo’s enormous academic career, his legacy during the Enlightenment, attempts to reconstruct his biography remain challenging. This is what we know: Born in Ghana around 1700, the man we know as Anton Wilhelm Amo was captured and enslaved as a little child. It was Herzog Anton Ulrich who bought and renamed him and offered him what was a very rare option for slaves: education, even higher education. Amo studied philosophy and law in Halle. In 1729, he wrote his dissertation on the legal status of Blacks in Europe – a document that has been lost under unclear circumstances – and gained his Magister in philosophy in 1730. Only a few years later, in 1734, Amo defended his doctoral thesis entitled De humanae mentis apatheia in philosophy at the University of Wittenberg. For some years, Amo worked as a private lecturer at the universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena, influencing many of the relevant debates within philosophy of his time. In spite of his success and influence, his life in Germany was determined by the spirit of his time: slavery was blossoming and racism – its shield and sword – was becoming even more aggressive when Enlightenment struggled to put it on a scientific pedestal. Thus the professor and philosopher Amo was living in isolation and discriminated against within German academia and broader society. Some of the few documents that bespeak the discrimination against his person are the racist satirical poems about Anton Wilhelm Amo (Belustigende Poetische Schaubühne) by
Johann Ernst Philippi. Feeling even more at loss after facing a close friend’s death, Amo decided to ‘return’ to Ghana.

In the two days workshop we discussed the interdependence of Amo’s life journey between the European enslavement of Africans, his scholarly work and the dynamics of canonizing knowledge production in and since the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment is known to have set the path for the modern pursuit of egalitv, freedom and liberty as well as Western democracy. Part and parcel of these elaborations on reason and progress was the endeavour to establish a scientific underpinning for the invention of ‘races’ as generated in late 16th century and relying on narrations about difference and power that can be traced back as far as antiquity. The Enlightenment’s eagerness to prove the existence of human ‘races’ aimed at claiming the superiority of whites and thus their ‘right’ to enslave Africans and colonise wide parts of the world. That was not a by-product of the Enlightenment, but shaped the world view of such men as Hume, Kant and Voltaire.

Immanuel Kant, who was strongly influenced by David Hume, introduced the term ‘race’ to the German intellectual discourse. Putting himself in the tradition of antiquity and Renaissance, Kant believed in the existence of hereditarily determined skin colours — whereby he describes other sub-criteria, such as perspiration odours, blood characteristics (of Blacks) and a less sensitive skin (of the First Nations of America) as relevant, too. He also claimed that these physical differences were to be interpreted mentally and positioned in a hierarchy. Thus, for example, he insisted that the difference between whites and Blacks was not fundamental with regard just to colour, but also to the ability to experience deeper feelings. Thus framed, he identifies four races and argued that slavery is legitimate, as long as Blacks are enslaved by whites. In his very late years, he even goes as far as asking for the extermination of the First Nations of America and Blacks. Amongst his numerous racist statements, the following is particularly relevant within this context. Kant writes, very close to Hume’s original wording, that among the "hundreds of thousands of blacks not a single one [was] ever found who was able to imagine anything great with regard to art or science, or any other honourable characteristic”. By contrast, there were ample examples of how "the whites continually rose above [...] the lowest masses and, through excellent ability, acquired respect in the world. The difference between these two human races is so fundamental, and it seems to be just as fundamental with regard to the ability to experience finer feelings as with regard to colour."

We may wonder: How did Kant manage not to know Amo and his work? Jacob Emmanuel Mabe argues that the idea of “das Ding an sich” (the thing itself) which we happen to associate with Immanuel Kant and Johann Heinrich Lambert was already approached by Amo systematically and intensively, while these two philosophers were still in their infancy (Mabe 56). Moreover, not Schleiermacher, born in 1768, but Amo was, according to Mabe, the first theoretician of early modern hermeneutics (Mabe 72). That Kant (and others) ignored and silenced Amos findings and knowledge can only be explained by a firm belief in the racist agenda referred to above. In fact, it is this very racism and the resultant status of Blacks in Europe that is at the fore in Amo’s first publication (1729), his jurisprudential treatise entitled “On the Right of Moors in Europe”. The scripture is lost and hence we can only make guesses about its argument, relying on the reports written about it by his white contemporaries. Referring back to Roman history and law, Amo argues that Roman law did recognize African kingdoms, allowing Africans in Europe to have the status of visiting royal subjects, thus being entitled to legal protection. Thus framed, the legal theorist Amo scrutinises the position of Blacks in the Europe of his time, where nearly all Black person were forced into enslavement. In fact, we do not even know whether Amo himself was ever granted his personal freedom.
Research needs to delve much deeper into Amo’s work. Till today, research’s major focus is not on his work or his influence on his contemporary fellow thinkers and academic successors, but rather on his degraded position. This, in turn, is discursively embedded in the dominant perception of ‘Africa’ that positions biographies like Amo’s outside of history, as philosophically disenfranchised and as entirely defined by race.

The first attempts to change this lens of perception can be connected with the beginning of the decolonization of Africa. In the 1960s, under the influence of Kwame Nkrumah, East Germany’s university in Jena initiated a new remembrance. Amo’s work was translated from Latin to English, German and French and a sculpture was dedicated to him. However, this monument is heavily coloured by the racist discourse of both Amo’s lifetime and the 1960s. He is presented half-nakedly, with an unnamed African woman at his side. It would be unthinkable to put a white philosopher like Immanuel Kant on a dubious pedestal like this.

ILLUSTRATION:

Monument for Anton Wilhelm Amo at the University of Jena, Quelle: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Wilhelm_Amo

The workshop identified and investigated this complex dynamics of Amo’s work and its perception, aiming at intensifying transdisciplinary and decolonising research projects. Future scholarship has to add missing biographical or research references. Moreover, research is needed to identify, analyse and overcome the silencing of the very knowledge that was generated by Amo, digging for reasons for the whereabouts of this politics of silencing his knowledge. After all, Amo, who lived most of his active life and all of his academic career in Europe, is hardly ever considered as part of the history of Prussia, Germany and Enlightenment. In succession to this workshop and his stay as a Fellow of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, Ottmar Ette, member of its Advisory Board, has enriched the debate by publishing his book *Anton Wilhelm Amo – Philosophieren ohne festen Wohnsitz* with Kadmos Verlag (2014). Another publication that documents the research
findings of the workshop as edited by Susan Arndt and Peggy Piesche is forthcoming.

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