

**BASLER  AFRIKA
BIBLIOGRAPHIEN**
Namibia Resource Centre - Southern Africa Library

Dag Henrichsen
(Basler Afrika Bibliographien)

Giorgio Miescher
(Centre for African Studies, University of Basel)

**Namibian and Southern African Studies in Basel:
A case for an intellectual project**

BAB Working Paper No 1: 2017

ISSN 1422-8769 © The author © Basler Afrika Bibliographien

Basler Afrika Bibliographien Klosterberg 23 CH 4051 Basel Switzerland

Tel + 41 61 228 93 33 Fax + 41 61 228 93 30 Email bab@baslerafrika.ch

BASLER AFRIKA BIBLIOGRAPHIEN

Namibia Resource Centre - Southern Africa Library

BAB Working Papers (ISSN 1422-8769)

The BAB Working Papers are being published since 1995. Recent numbers include:

- Working Paper No 1: 2013 Henning Melber**
Liberation Movements as Governments: Democratic
Authoritarianism in Former Settler Colonies of Southern Africa
- Working Paper No 2: 2013 Silke Isaak-Finhold**
Namibia und Südafrika:
Befreiungsbewegungen an der Macht
- Working Paper No 1: 2014 Lorena Rizzo**
Faszination Landschaft
Landschaftsfotographie in Namibia
- Working Paper No 2: 2014 Kletus Likuwa**
Contract Labour System and Farm Labourers' Experiences
in Pre-Independent Namibia: Historical Reflections,
Perspectives and Lessons
- Working Paper No 3: 2014 Sigrid Schmidt**
Some Notes on the so-called Heitsi-Eibeb Graves in
Namibia: Ancient Heaps of Stones at the Roadside
- Working Paper No 1: 2016 Christiane Bürger**
Der koloniale Völkermord und die Geschichtspolitik der DDR
- Working Paper No 2: 2016 Raphael Jenny**
Betrachtungen zum Bildarchiv der Solidaritätsgruppe „Medic'
Angola / kämpfendes afrika“ (Zürich, 1971 – 1988)
- Working Paper No 3: 2016 Henning Melber**
Revisiting the Windhoek Old Location

ORDER (CHF 5.00 each + p&p):

**Basler Afrika Bibliographien Klosterberg 23 CH 4051 Basel Switzerland
www.baslerafrika.ch**

Namibian and Southern African Studies in Basel: A case for an intellectual project*

Dag Henrichsen, Giorgio Miescher

Two decades ago the human and social sciences at the University of Basel, Switzerland, had only a marginal interest in Africa. Since then, the engagement with Africa has become a continuous, though not self-evident, part of the university's teaching and research programmes. This also holds true for African history, represented by a professorship since 2001.¹ Today, the university's Centre for African Studies, established in 2002/3, provides in particular students of history, as well as those from the humanities and social sciences more generally, with a broad range of teaching and research possibilities that extend significantly beyond the field of African history.²

In this essay we are not so much concerned with the reasons for the establishment of African Studies and African history at the University of Basel; these have been spelled out elsewhere.³ Nor do we need to plea for an engagement with Africa given the fact that the university currently boasts some 150 Africa-related research projects and can count on stable numbers of interested students.⁴ Here, we want to review critically the possibilities and limitations of working on Africa as historians, and social and human scientists, located in Basel. The primary current challenges for African Studies at the University of Basel are not necessarily of an institutional nature. Rather, they relate to intellectual, and as such conceptual, challenges of a young discipline which needs to reflect on its subject matter, not least due to recent trends which favour Global Studies. Based on our own experiences and disciplines, we focus on *Namibian and Southern African Studies* in order to make a case for *African Studies* as an intellectual project.

* This essay is written in the personal capacities of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien or the Carl Schlettwein Foundation. It is a (slightly altered) translation of "Namibian and Southern African Studies in Basel: Ein Plädoyer für ein intellektuelles Projekt" (Regio Basiliensis, forthcoming). Our reflections have been enriched through conversations with various colleagues, notably with Lorena Rizzo, and comments by Elísio Macamo on an earlier version, for which we are most grateful.

1 The professorship was originally established in 2001 by the Carl Schlettwein Foundation and for Patrick Harries. In 2008 the University of Basel confirmed and integrated the Chair of African History into the Department of History

2 The Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel coordinates a wide range of teaching courses from various fields, departments and faculties, and offers an MA in African Studies. See their website at www.zasb.unibas.ch

3 See Patrick Harries und Giorgio Miescher: "Immer etwas Neues aus Afrika: Einige Überlegungen zur Geschichte Afrikas in Basel", Regio Basiliensis, 45, 2, September 2004, pp. 87-98.

4 Information provided by the Centre for African Studies (CASB), University of Basel, August 2016.

1. Foundations, strengths and limitations

Crucial foundations for any human and social science research and teaching engagement are research libraries and archives, academic exchange and participation in debates and networks, as well as financial resources. These foundations do exist for African Studies in Basel and can be regarded as ideal in the national context of Switzerland. They shape some particular (historical) foci in Basel, but also lead to very particular challenges. This can be explained by looking at the existing research libraries and archives in the city of Basel. Two collections in particular, the Mission 21 and the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, have to be regarded as *African heritage* institutions par excellence and thus as crucial African memory archives in Europe. Both are run privately and do not form part of the University of Basel. Both have built sustainable networks with African partners over a number of decades, and both provide significant intellectual incentives and challenges for academic research and teaching in Basel.⁵

The archive of Mission 21, emanating from the 200-year-old history of the Basel Mission, is well known and marked by a strong focus on written and visual (photographs and maps) collections. The archive's projects with regard to visual history have been pivotally influential, and the comprehensive digitisation and cataloguing of its image and map collections, connected to various research projects, remains exemplary.⁶ Together with two collections that are closely linked to the mission archive—the Union Trading Company of Basel collection and that of the Museum der Kulturen (Museum of Cultures) in Basel—the archive offers a well established base for cultural, social and religious studies that go beyond classic studies of mission and colonial history or traditional ethnographies.

The collections of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) are of a slightly different nature. They focus on Southern Africa, and in particular on Namibia.⁷ Unusual for an institution in Europe, this library and archive not only maintains collections on a specific African country but constantly expands these. As such, the BAB library is not only a research library, but in some ways functions as a national library for Namibia (the largest outside of Namibia at that), focusing on publications from and on that country and, though to a significantly lesser extent, the wider region. Initially established with the mission of decolonising colonial knowledge on Namibia, the library regards itself today as a postcolonial documentation centre in its broadest sense. It collects “everything”, ranging from conventional publications to grey literature, and from ephemera to audiovisual documents—a range and depth not found anywhere else in Europe. Its archives mainly comprise personal papers and written and audiovisual documents

5 The Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (STPHI) engages in research and teaching, mainly with reference to Africa, and also maintains a large research library.

6 See the interactive database <http://www.mission-21.org/forschung-und-wissenschaft/bmarchives/>

7 We based the following on our knowledge of and experiences at the BAB as long-term staff members.

which were generated in the context of research projects in Namibia and the wider region—a crucial addition to the existing library.⁸ The numerous interviews from Namibia alone provide depth, themes and varied perspectives, as well as, critically, Namibian “voices”.

This focus and the plurality of collections and documents imply, importantly, particular perspectives. The BAB’s Namibia library and its African archives allow for research and teaching that is grounded in knowledge and knowledge traditions produced in Namibia itself and not, as usual for Africa-related libraries in Europe, on knowledge produced outside Africa. The particular Namibian focus of the BAB also enhances the perspective of thinking “Southern Africa” from its margins and not, as usual, from its South African centres. This has consequences for research debates and knowledge production, as we shall explain shortly.

The plurality of documents and media in the BAB collections, and in particular those relating to so-called ephemera (posters, calendars, brochures, leaflets, etc.) and to audiovisual materials (various sound and image archives), provides for a very diverse, interrelated historical and audiovisual research base without which historical and socio-cultural research is no longer possible. To work with such a research base cannot be done without scrutinising the particular contexts in which these documents were produced and why and how they ended up in Basel. Working with such collections in Europe always implies to critically consider their position in the colonial project and post-colonial present. But taken together, the Mission 21 and BAB collections, we would argue, crucially provide subaltern, subjective, regional and local African perspectives in manifold articulations and across colonial and postcolonial time and space frameworks. This situation provides research and teaching projects based in Basel with numerous opportunities and challenges, as well as some priorities that we discuss further on.

It has to be stressed that both institutions have for decades maintained close relationships with African partners and partner institutions. As *heritage* and memory institutions, this is a necessity if central principles of research partnerships are to be honoured.⁹ These principles demand that collaboration and responsibilities are jointly maintained, and that collection development and accessibility, as well as efforts to build sustained research capacities, are jointly supported from both sides. Simply flying African partners to Basel or fleetingly visiting conferences in African capitals is not sufficient to create such networks and definitely does not build collection and research capacities. For these to take root, the two sides jointly have to engage in long-term projects with and on collections and in research are. These foundations are provided

8 The BAB does not export archival collections from Namibia to Basel; these are rather referred to Namibian archives. The BAB’s collections are rather made up of the papers and collections of European-based individuals and institutions that in some form were active in Namibia. Published materials, in contrast, are acquired from Namibia extensively.

9 For this see the “Leitfaden für grenzüberschreitende Forschungspartnerschaften. 11 Prinzipien” (Guidelines for cross-border research partnerships: 11 principles” by the Kommission für Forschungspartnerschaften mit Entwicklungsländern (KFPE) (Commission for research partnerships with developing countries), Bern, 2012.

for by both the BAB and Mission 21¹⁰ due to long-lasting exchanges, partnerships and networks which were build not least for the sake of sustainability, including for example through publications (as by the BAB Publishing House) or through exhibitions staged both in Basel and in African towns and cities.

Obviously, the foundations and strengths of the Basel institutions need to be compared to those of other European African Studies centres. One manifest difference is the absence in Basel and in German-speaking Switzerland more widely of the importance of Afro-European and Afro-American diaspora communities. In centres such as London, Paris or Berlin these diaspora communities have been and continue to be crucial with regard to research themes and public (political) interventions, and well as in relation to the transnational African-European Studies project as such. The “forms and consequences of colonialism without colonies”, taken from the subtitle of the book *Postkoloniale Schweiz* (Postcolonial Switzerland),¹¹ have consequences for African Studies in Basel. Histories of (possible) diasporas and of racism, or shared African-Swiss histories are hardly taught and researched here, whilst Swiss economic or science histories are rarely questioned against the backdrop of the European imperial age. Alterity as a postcolonial perspective for Switzerland is largely absent.

2. Perspectives and partnerships

A central feature of the humanities and social sciences is their reflective subjectivity, largely absent in the natural sciences. This also holds true for the discipline of history. History writing takes place from a particular perspective, not least because it always views the past from the present. In addition to this time dimension, subjective positions in history writing are inherent due to the writer’s spatial, geo-political, socio-economic, methodological, epistemological and ideological positions (this list can be extended) as well as categories of race and gender and his or her particular institutional location. All this may be self-evident and manifests itself in historiographical discourses, for example, in the shifts from event to structural history, to histories “from below”, to everyday histories, to cultural histories, and now to shared or global histories. Such paradigmatic shifts are accompanied by intense debates, and yet are rooted in a shared understanding of those involved of their positioning in geo-political centres of powerful knowledge production and thinking about the past. These non-negotiable/un-reflective positions and the resulting knowledge production reflect and perpetuate a certain geo-political configuration, as is argued by the Argentinian literary scholar and intellectual Walter D. Mignolo. One consequence of this, he argues, is that people and regions are primarily classified according to race, whilst the so-called western world is constructed as centre vis-à-vis the previously

10 Here the STPHI needs also to be mentioned again.

11 Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi, and Francesca Falk (eds.), *Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien*, Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2013.

colonised world.¹² Mignolo thus suggests an epistemological turn: knowledge production needs to be based and positioned explicitly in the so-called non-western world, a prerequisite for the decolonisation of knowledge and for allowing for the emergence of independent, “de-linked” perspectives which no longer aim at being recognised or integrated into a Western canon of knowledge. This position stands in direct contrast to models suggesting a multi-centred world in which different perspectives keep each other in balance.¹³ Such an independent perspective is not necessarily an essentialising one, but rather suggests the development of sets of questions grounded in specific experiences and relevant (or not) for western thinking and historical understanding.¹⁴

Questions relating to the positioning of knowledge production and, connected to this, questions about what a university is and should be, are intensively debated in Southern Africa.¹⁵ These debates not only target issues concerning epistemological decolonisation but also the socio-economic and political frameworks which regulate access to and participation in the teaching and research programmes of universities. These debates show that universities in Southern Africa and in central Europe display similar organisational and academic structures whilst knowledge production and transfer take place in significantly different contexts, given different geo-political positions and particular socio-economic and political frameworks and experiences.¹⁶ This holds particularly true for the humanities and, thus, such for the discipline of history. Thinking about the past and with history in Southern Africa takes place in a post-colonial present, and in the context of particular challenges due to this present. Here, perspectives and themes focus on public history and memory, local history¹⁷ and experiences of racism, apartheid and colonialism, all of which receive significantly less attention in western Europe. This also holds true, to mention another example, for debates about the historical evaluation of the liberation struggles, which in Southern Africa is not merely an academic enquiry but questions the identity and political praxis of current political elites who are a product of these struggles. The importance and intensity of these debates can be compared to the debates in Switzerland in the

12 Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:7–8 (2009), pp. 1–23.

13 On this see Joseph C. Miller, “Beyond Blacks, Bondage, and Blame: Why a Multi-centric World History Needs Africa”, *Historically Speaking* 6:2 (2004), pp. 7–11.

14 The dangers of essentialising in African history are discussed in Frederick Cooper, “The Future of the Discipline: African History/Global History”, *Perspectives on History*, (December 2012).

15 This is currently a very lively debate in South Africa. See, for example, the ongoing lecture series of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, on the topic of “Universities in Africa”. See also the reflections on history writing in South Africa by Premesh Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts*, Cape Town: Human Science Research Council, 2009, esp. Ch. 10: “A Subaltern Studies for South African History”.

16 It should be stressed that the university landscape in Southern Africa is very diverse and displays significant differences in terms of histories or financial resources.

17 On the current—and increasing—importance of local history research in South Africa, see the research programme “Local Histories and Present Realities” at the University of the Witwatersrand (<https://www.wits.ac.za/socialsciences/nrf-sarchi-chair-in-history/about-us/>).

1980s and 1990s on the collaboration of the Swiss government and elites with fascist Germany; not to mention the debates in Southern Africa about redistribution and empowerment that cannot be understood without taking into account the manner in which apartheid and colonialism were experienced by several generations of people.

Our own teaching and research practices uphold this particular perspective. We are primarily concerned with thinking along this perspective and the said postcolonial and lived experiences in Southern Africa and do not merely want to understand these. Formulated differently: our goal is to reach for a history *from* and not simply *on* Southern Africa. We are conscious about the fact that such a position and engagement could, though does not necessarily need to, stand in contradiction with our location in Basel. Being a programmatic goal, it definitely is practicable and fruitful for working from Basel.

To be clear, our approach does not mean that we ignore the necessity and relevance of other methodological and theoretical implications in doing history. However, we insist on the programmatic relevance of striving for a history *from* Southern Africa. In order to achieve this goal we take three considerations into account. The first one is the existence of research libraries and archives. The BAB collections provide such possibility for Namibia and, with certain limitations, for the whole of Southern Africa. A second consideration is the long-lasting and intense collaboration with local partners in the region, which likewise exists and is continuously expanded, and this not only for Namibia. The third consideration, disregarded so far, is the continuous presence of African academics and students in Basel itself. External factors, such as increasingly restrictive Swiss visa regulations and increasing currency exchange discrepancies, hinder efforts for an exchange on equal terms. Yet, in order to achieve and maintain a history from Africa in Basel, we are dependent, both institutionally and personally, on African colleagues and partners and their willingness to work with us. We cannot do without them. In contrast, often such collaboration follows different agendas from an African perspective. Various universities in Southern Africa, for example, can choose from a pool of partners, not least because of pressures on universities in the so-called global North to maintain cooperation in the global South. In this context, African history and African Studies in Basel need to learn from programmes run by Asian and US American universities.

In summary, existing frameworks, foundations and competencies in Basel allow for working towards a history in and from Southern Africa. This holds true especially for Namibia and in part for the southern subcontinent, though not for the whole of Africa. The latter is hardly represented by institutions or personal foundations in Basel. Thus, to talk of “African” history in Basel in terms of teaching and research programmes is inaccurate and presumptuous and reflects current and dominant academic frameworks, conceptualisations and classifications. Less ambitious but more precise and realistic is a focus on the region which is reflected best in the existing possibilities in Basel, namely Namibia and Southern Africa. Critically, however, we

understand such a focus not merely as a regional one but as an intellectual project with conceptual questions and perspectives.

3 Interventions and debates

Over the past five years we have thought the project “Namibian and Southern African Studies” anew and in conjunction with many colleagues in Southern Africa developed the research project “South African Empire”.¹⁸ Its central hypothesis maintained that imperial cultures not only existed in European imperial histories but also led to new “imperial histories” and manifold regional colonialisms and experiences in other parts of the world, especially in the 20th century. In the case of Southern Africa with its British, Lusophone and German colonial traditions, one can observe an intense South African “empire building” and colonial, economic and military expansion throughout the region, this at the time of African decolonisation during the 1950s and 1960s. The South African Empire project asked the question of how the region can be re-figured from its margins and understood in a de-territorialised and transnational way. A central approach aimed to deconstruct the South African national state, argued as having achieved national sovereignty in the course of the 20th century without recognising and possibly even fully denying its regional, and thus colonial and imperial, agendas and, in turn, its massive postcolonial reverberations. The research project allowed for the rethinking of regional history and the questioning of the conventional narrative of an emerging South African national state. We maintained that the South African state developed and continues to develop strong and very flexible machinations of “Empire Building” and thus resilient internal and external relations of dependency and power.

The South African Empire project intervened purposefully in historiographical debates and challenged traditions maintained by nationalist South African research, including viewpoints held by South African liberation movements. These traditions have of late been immortalised by leading historians in the standard reference work of the *Cambridge History of South Africa*.¹⁹ Transnational perspectives in Southern Africa—one can think of, for example, transnational migrant worker networks or transnational exile populations during the liberation struggles—continue to be marginal, whilst national perspectives, whether in Namibia or Zimbabwe, are often a postcolonial reflex towards the historically experienced “empire building” by the colonial and postcolonial South African state, at the same time as being a strong interest in the fields of heritage and public history.

For our project here we can summarise two main conclusions that emanate from the empire research project: one refers to the importance of refigured nationalisms and national sovereign-

18 The following is based primarily on the reflections by Dag Henrichsen, Giorgio Miescher, Ciraj Rassool and Lorena Rizzo in “Rethinking Empire in Southern Africa”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Special Issue South African Empire, 41:3 (2015), pp. 431–435.

19 *Ibid*, p. 431.

ties. As we explain elsewhere, thinking along the lines of a South African Empire provides possibilities of viewing and analysing South Africa's internal and external history of power and authority in nuanced ways and forms.²⁰ The second conclusion points not only to the importance of transnational, constantly shifting regional power structures, but also to the manner in which local experiences and memory histories are intertwined, enmeshed and linked with regional landscapes of experiences and memory. This includes diverse regional research traditions as they developed at universities in Maputo, Windhoek or Harare. In this respect the marked differences with regard to knowledge and history production in Southern Africa continue to be influenced by the regional and international empire structures of the 20th centuries.

The research project South African Empire developed both out of an engagement with BAB collections, and out of and with a network of historians working in and on Namibian history. It thus exemplifies the intellectual quest with which we view libraries and archives based in Basel and which relate to projects rooted in Southern African traditions of research and knowledge production.

4. Teaching and research

Teaching and research in Namibian and Southern African Studies have a long tradition in Basel and since the 1990s have been expanded considerably by the BAB and the Department of History of the University of Basel. The BAB realised numerous projects apart from the above mentioned South African Empire project, such as book and exhibition projects on African visualities (posters and photographs) and workshops and research seminars on Namibian history, Public History and Memory and the importance on (post-)colonial archives and libraries.²¹ These activities were often linked to teaching courses at the Department of History in Basel and at times led to exhibition projects (more recently, for example, “Kaboom! African Comics in Focus”; “Usakos: Photographs beyond Ruins”; “White Lady—Black Lady: Photography and the Everyday in African Rock Art Research”) as well as, critically, parallel activities at universities in Namibia, South Africa or, of late, Zambia.²² Last but not least, the BAB publishing house is particularly active in the field of Namibian Studies.²³ All in all, this makes the BAB

20 *Ibid.*, p. 433.

21 It is not possible to list or summarise all projects of concern. Long term research has included, for example, the various poster exhibition projects which resulted in publications such as Giorgio Miescher, Jeremy Silvester and Lorena Rizzo (eds.), *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*, Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009. Another example refers to the engagement and digitisation of acoustic archives, also in conjunction with an exhibition project, as summarised in Dag Henrichsen and Susanne Hubler Baier, “Seven Years of Digitising the Sound and Acoustic Archive”, in Annual Report 2015, edited by the Carl Schlettwein Stiftung & Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel, pp. 65–68.

22 For more information, see the BAB website (www.baslerafrika.ch).

23 The *Basel Namibia Studies Series*, which often publishes doctoral theses from Namibian colleagues, and other BAB publication titles are listed on the BAB website.

one of the few institutions which sustains and promotes academic and intellectual collaboration and exchange with, in particular, Namibia. Since 2015 the newly created teaching and research position for Namibian and Southern African Studies at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel offers the underpinning for, focuses and deepens these existing activities and frameworks.

Teaching, research and collections are closely intertwined. On the one hand all three fields are often dealt with by the same people. On the other hand it is through teaching that students learn about professional fields in research, libraries and archives; students are always also potential colleagues. For our project of Namibian and Southern African Studies this also implies, right from the beginning, a close collaboration with relevant institutions and colleagues in Southern Africa, at universities and beyond. The basis for this is formed by bilateral agreements, so-called “Exchange Agreements”, between universities. Currently the University of Basel maintains agreements with the universities of the Western Cape, Cape Town and the Witwatersrand, all in South Africa. Other bilateral agreements and structures have been established, such as the Swiss-South Africa Joint Research Programme which enables a wide and sustained collaboration with colleagues in South Africa, as well as, importantly, joint research projects.²⁴ In September 2016, the University of Basel and the University of Namibia, Windhoek, were finally able to sign an exchange agreement to provide the necessary formal basis for our general project; this includes considerations regarding research collections at libraries and archives.

Our intention and aim in teaching is to enable students to learn to think from within Southern African perspectives. This is not possible without the BAB library and archives. But it is only a first step. It is crucial that Basel students experience direct exchanges with students and lecturers from Southern Africa. This can be achieved in various ways as, for example, by joint projects or by exchanges of students and lecturers in both ways. In order to succeed in such transcontinental collaboration, communication skills are essential and English needs to be the medium of instruction. Teaching contents, in turn, are obviously linked to teaching personnel. Despite the rather limited capacities in Basel in this respect, the University of Basel is in a position to offer teaching courses in many fields of the human, social and natural sciences. The teaching in the latter is possible due to the competencies at hand in the Department of Environmental Sciences at Basel, with which the BAB has organised a joint interdisciplinary “Namibian and Southern African Studies Research Colloquium” since 2015.²⁵ Actively pursued inter- or transdisciplinary work is a vital and enriching intellectual challenge not only for students but also for lecturers. This is important for our project as it points towards unknown ter-

24 The Swiss-South Africa Joint Research Programme is supported by the Swiss National Research Fund and the South African National Research Foundation and is attached to the University of Basel, the latter function as the so-called “Leading House”.

25 The colloquium is jointly organised by Lena Bloemertz, Departement Umweltwissenschaften (Environmental sciences), and the current authors. For the programme, see the event lists of the CASB and the BAB.

rain, and we want to expand the collaboration in teaching and research between the disciplines of history and geography.

In research, too, themes are linked to personal interests and priorities. But this is only one aspect. On the level of institutions two additional aspects need to be observed. First is the access to and mediation of research resources. As stated above, the BAB provides these in ways and means unparalleled in Europe in relation to studies on Africa. The future challenge in this regard rests with accessibility to digital resources. This refers not only to the digitisation of conventional library and archival collections, but also to the accessibility of *digitally-born* resources and data. Together, these digital resources need to be conceptualised, also from a political point of view, within the *African Digital Humanities*.²⁶ In the context of an intellectual project in terms of Namibian and Southern African Studies, this implies an intellectual partnership on the level of collections, accessibility and mediation. The BAB is currently working within a network of Namibian, South African and Swiss institutions to implement the pilot project of a Namibian-owned “Namibia Digital Collection”.²⁷ Apart from technical issues, content-related questions are of crucial concern. Namibian partners, for example, prioritise differently than European partners regarding the importance of African languages and literatures, or in terms of digital image collections on labour migration or on the liberation struggle and exile. To be sure: *digital assets* in German play only a secondary role in the considerations by Namibian partners. Debates such as these are necessary, the more so as past digitisation projects, notably those by US American universities and such concerning Southern Africa, have been heavily criticised for their unreflexive and technocratic approaches towards database content.²⁸ Any technical as well as intellectual conceptualisation and sustainability of the Namibia Digital Collection project is thus only given if debates on the level of research collections in libraries and archives are not shunned but sought out determinately and within a long term perspective for the sake of digital knowledge and research production. Whilst the foundations in Basel are ideal for all this, the implementation needs to be taken to the fore.

The second and final aspect concerns the institutional university context within which research takes place. The academic landscape in Southern Africa is very heterogeneous. In South Africa, for example, one finds very dynamic and creative research centres which compete on a global scale, such as the “Flagship on Critical Thought in African Humanities” at the Centre

26 For an introduction, see Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace, *African Studies in the Digital Age: DisConnects?*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

27 On the foundations of the project, see Reto Ulrich, “Namibia Digital Library: Ein kooperatives Digitalisierungsprojekt zwischen der Schweiz und Namibia; eine Analyse der bibliothekspolitischen Landschaft Namibias als Vorstufe der Projektplanung.” Unpublished MA thesis, Universities of Berne and Lausanne, 2014.

28 On such critiques, especially those on the ownership of collections and research databases, see, for example, Premesh Lalu, “The Virtual Stampede for Africa: Digitization, Postcoloniality and Archives of the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa”, in Divya Dwivedi und Sanil V. (eds.), *The Public Sphere from Outside the West*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 225–239.

for Humanities Research of the University of the Western Cape. Many universities, however, such as the University of Fort Hare or North-West University, struggle with basic financial and staff resources and thus also with the implementation and sustainability of research projects. The University of Namibia, our most important partner in Southern Africa, oscillates between these two positions, grappling with establishing its own research tradition. We maintain that any research in the fields of Namibian and Southern African Studies needs to be conducted in close collaboration with local African research institutions and with colleagues there. Such collaboration can take different forms, and certainly the expectations amongst those involved, whether in Windhoek or Basel or Cape Town, do not necessarily overlap in all respects! The Department of Geography, History and Environmental Studies at the University of Namibia, for example, is looking for a kind of research collaboration in which not only joint research seminars in Namibia are possible but also short-term research and writing periods in Basel, given the heavy teaching loads at the Windhoek university and the rich resources available in Basel.

5. Conclusion

We have argued that the challenges of African Studies in Basel are primarily of an intellectual nature and not so much an organisational or institutional issue. In many countries of the formerly colonised world the urgency and energy with which to achieve an epistemological and paradigmatic change in the production of knowledge is very much apparent, as are demands for the establishment of independent knowledge traditions. Here we showed that Basel has solid foundations to participate in these endeavours. This stands in contrast to an understanding of African history or African Studies as offering expertise “about Africa” but that continues to be stuck in Eurocentric categories, conceptualisation and frameworks. Namibian and Southern African Studies in Basel need to be an intellectual and collaborative project that thinks within as well as outside of African contexts and perspectives and does so simultaneously on all levels of teaching, research and collections.

Dag Henrichsen

dh@baslerafrika.ch

Giorgio Miescher

giorgio.miescher@unibas.ch