

PRESS INFORMATION

DGSKA honours dissertation of social anthropologist Sabrina Maurus

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (DGSKA – German Anthropology Association) has awarded Cluster member Sabrina Maurus with the “Dissertationspreis” – an award for the best dissertation in the field of sociocultural anthropology. It is the third award for Maurus’ dissertation.

Bayreuth, 19.10.2021 Sabrina Maurus has been awarded the first “Dissertationspreis“ out of three prizes issued by the “Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie” (DGSKA) for her thesis „Battles over State Making on a Frontier. Dilemmas of Schooling, Young People and Agro-Pastoralism in Hamar, South West Ethiopia“. The award ceremony, that was held virtually this year due to the pandemic, took place on 29 September 2021 at the general assembly of the DGSKA. “Although it would have been nice to attend the ceremony in person, the digital event allowed me to participate from Benin, where I am currently doing fieldwork”, says Sabrina Maurus. The biennial award honours excellent ethnological dissertations from the German-speaking world. Maurus’ thesis was one of 49 submitted doctoral dissertations and was nominated by Prof. Dr. Erdmute Alber who was her doctoral advisor at BIGSAS and the University of Bayreuth.

It is the third time that the thesis has been recognized: Apart from the latest recognition, the dissertation was also awarded the second prize for excellent and practice-relevant development research by the KfW Development Bank (2021) and the prize of the City of Bayreuth for outstanding dissertations (2020). Prof. Alber, vice dean of Research at the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, points out: “These three awards are evidence of the outstanding excellence of Maurus’ thesis. The ‘Dissertationspreis’ of the DGSKA, however, is especially rewarding, since it is the highest recognition for a thesis in the German speaking world of sociocultural anthropology.”

Maurus’ thesis on compulsory schooling in Ethiopia is based on long periods of fieldwork in the region. For 19 months, Sabrina Maurus particularly studied the South Omo region in the southwest of the country, where the livelihoods of various ethnic groups are mainly based on agriculture and animal husbandry with little state influence. In 2010, however, this changed rapidly, when the Ethiopian central government began to expand infrastructure to South Omo, and started to enforce compulsory schooling. A violent conflict over the issue ensued during Maurus fieldwork in 2014/15 between Ethiopian

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government representatives and the local population in Hamar district. In her study, the Bayreuth social anthropologist traces this conflict through the perspectives of first-generation pupils and students, who experience violence from both sides. The dissertation identifies dilemmas and struggles that permeate all areas of student's life - from lifestyle and dress, to choice of spouse. Maurus shows how this conflict over young people and their education is part of a larger conflict. At its core is the question of legitimate power on the frontier of the state that is disputed by the question of who has the right to decide about young people's education: the state, the parents or the children? The work impressively demonstrates how the implementation of compulsory schooling affects not only children but societies at large with contradictory consequences.

"Governments and international organisations involved in development cooperation assume that compulsory schooling is an important stimulus for the economic growth of a country. However, the example of agropastoral societies shows how complex the question of good and sustainable education that serves the economic practices of local people really is. Furthermore, we see a growing number of school-educated unemployed youth. This makes it all the more important to make the actual and sometimes conflicting conditions on the ground the starting point for planning educational programmes," says Maurus, who is currently part of the Cluster of Excellence's Research Section "Learning" and working on the research project "Making a Living: Learning trajectories towards the ability to earn a livelihood" in Benin. In this framework, she continues to study education not in isolation, but in relation to political, kinship, gender, and generational relations, as well as economic livelihoods.

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