Africa Multiple *connects* 1

Figuring Out How To Reconfigure African Studies

Rüdiger Seesemann

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WORKING PAPERS

Figuring Out How to Reconfigure African Studies

New Year Lecture
Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, January 16, 2020

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Institute of African Studies (IAS)

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Africa Multiple *connects*

As the Working Paper Series of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, **Africa Multiple *connects*** offers a forum for research conducted and presented by researchers affiliated to the Cluster. The series also accommodates papers such as invited lectures, workshop contributions, or conference papers submitted by the Cluster's guests and visiting scholars.

Established in January 2019 through the Excellence Strategy of the German Federal and State Governments, and building on a long record in African Studies at the University of Bayreuth, the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence pursues an innovative agenda as expressed in its subtitle, *Reconfiguring African Studies.* The Cluster hosts almost one hundred fifty scholars from three continents, who represent a diverse range of academic disciplines and pursue joint research interests together with partner institutions in Africa, Germany, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Our understanding of the reconfiguration of African Studies focuses on stimulating new theoretical approaches and includes the creation of new forms of academic collaboration. The Cluster develops and pursues research questions and theory-building in collaborative interdisciplinary projects, most notably those conducted with our *African Cluster Centres* (ACCs) at the Universities of Lagos (Nigeria), Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso), Moi (Kenya), and Rhodes (South Africa).

Our key concepts are *multiplicity, relationality,* and *reflexivity.* We employ them to capture the dynamic interrelationship of diversity and entanglement that characterize African and African diasporic ways of life and world-making. In the *Knowledge Lab*—the intellectual core of the Cluster—we connect our theoretical, epistemological, and methodological issues, spark intellectual exchange, and stimulate new theoretical advances. Our *Digital Research Environment* integrates heterogeneous analogue and digital data, both qualitative and quantitative, into a digital research platform, allowing us to share data and provide working formats that reflect the complexity, and dynamism of our research.

Africa Multiple *connects* complements the existing Working Paper sub-series published under the umbrella of the *University of Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers*: **academy reflects**, the sub-series featuring research by fellows and postdoc working groups of the *Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies,* which is now part of the Africa Multiple Cluster; and **BIGSASworks!**, the platform for publishing research-related articles and edited volumes by Junior Fellows of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS).

About the Author

Rüdiger Seesemann

A specialist in the study of Islam in Africa, Rüdiger Seesemann has held the Chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Bayreuth since 2011. He is the Spokesperson of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, which started its operations in 2019. His research focus is on Islam in nineteenth and twentieth century-Africa, a field where he has published widely. His publications include *The Divine Flood* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Sufism, Literary Production and Printing* (Ergon Verlag, 2015; ed. with R. Chih and C. Mayeur-Jaouen). Seesemann's more recent work focuses on theories and practices of Islamic knowledge and engages wider theoretical and epistemological questions in the study of Africa.

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1 Introduction[1]

This is the time of the year when American presidents prepare the annual State of the Union Address to the Congress of the United States. Given the timing of this first New Year Lecture of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, and given the fact that I deliver it as the cluster's Dean, it is tempting to use this occasion to mull over the "State of the Cluster." I will resist this temptation, though, and only take a few moments to recall some of the things we have achieved.

One of the highlights, of course, was the extraordinary concert last October at the Margravial Opera House here in Bayreuth, where we concluded our first international cluster conference. Those who were present will vividly recall how the five musicians from Madagascar, Mozambique and South Korea, enraptured us with their brilliant performance. Also present were, along with our university's President and the Nigerian novelist Elnathan John, the directors of our four African Cluster Centres, or ACCs.

Choosing the ACCs was probably the most significant task in year one of the cluster. After a long selection process, our research network now comprises the University of Lagos in Nigeria, Moi University in Kenya, Rhodes University in South Africa, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo University in Burkina Faso. On taking a closer look at the logos of our partners, I realized that all four feature an open book, along with keywords pointing to the paramount role of knowledge in our academic endeavors: Moi is founded on knowledge; Lagos cherishes truth; Ouagadougou values wisdom; and Rhodes upholds learning (Figures 1-4, respectively).

Figure 1 © Moi University
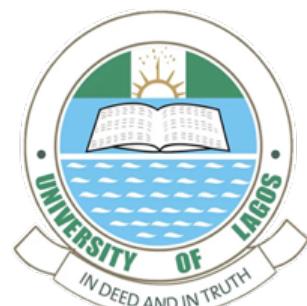
Figure 2 © University of Lagos

Figure 3 © Joseph Ki-Zerbo University
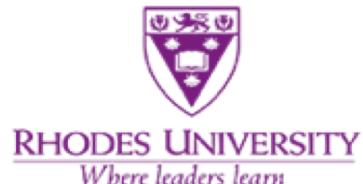
Figure 4 © Rhodes University

After googling a few other institutions, I found that the University of Oxford, the University of London, the University of California, Princeton and Harvard all use books in their logos.

This made me ponder over our logo at the University of Bayreuth, sometimes affectionately called "Harvard of Upper Franconia": How might the logo look like

Figure 5 © Mathias Süß, Dadaluxe

were it to accommodate a book (Figure 5)? Given the logo's current shape, this is easier said than done. As a matter of fact, the shape is not conducive to bringing the book in a position where we can actually read it. In any case, the physical effort needed to keep it open would distract us from intellectual engagement with the contents. And of course, the corporate design rules of our university, laid out in a slim 81-page Corporate Design handbook, do not allow us to tamper with the logo.

Figure 6 © University of Bayreuth

So let us draw some inspiration from our own cluster logo instead (Figure 6). The cone-shaped symbols may be read as arrow vectors that originate from various corners. They traverse the interstices between the overlapping rings in multiple directions, while connecting and reconnecting with the rings. Thus, the logo can serve as a metaphor for the collective knowledge production that we envision in our cluster. Gathering the knowledge from Moi, the wisdom from Ouagadougou, truth from Lagos, the learning from Rhodes, and the input from Bayreuth, we come together to embark on our intellectual journey toward new assemblages and multiple forms of knowledge production, designed to reconfigure African Studies.

This is a lofty objective, expressed in flowery language. It echoes the application prose of the initial cluster proposal. There we described the overarching aim of the cluster as "no less than the reconfiguration of African studies, on both the conceptual and the structural level." The cluster, we wrote in early 2018, "is conceived as a transformative space within which to systematically advance the study of African and African diasporic ways of life and world-making via the pursuit of cutting-edge research and theory-building based on new inter- and transdisciplinary formats of research cooperation." What a claim!

At least, it seems that the reviewers of our proposal found our claim compelling and sufficiently convincing back in September 2018; otherwise, our cluster would not have been selected for funding. Still—and I am saying this as one of the cluster's architects and its current head—developing a blueprint for the reconfiguration of African Studies is one thing, and implementing it is another. The first year of the cluster taught us an important lesson: reconfiguring African Studies is a process that requires perseverance. Rather than taking a few straightforward steps, we need to figure out over and over again how to reconfigure African Studies. Therefore, this lecture is not about the "State of the Cluster", but about some of the challenges that lie ahead; it is about figuring out the reconfiguration.

2 Reconfiguring African Studies

Perhaps a word is in order about our choice of "reconfiguring" over other terms, such as changing, modifying, transforming, reorienting, remaking, or renewing. When we began our work on the proposal as early as 2016, we did not have a title for our cluster yet, but we soon realized that the challenge was twofold: on the one hand, we were concerned with the *structural set-up* of African Studies, including hierarchies, the distribution of resources, and the organization of research infrastructure. On the other hand, we were poised to develop a new *conceptual framework* capable of addressing the shortcomings of previous approaches.

One of the conceptual problems is related to the very concept of "African Studies" with its underlying area studies logic. Moreover, as has become obvious over the past decades and even more urgent in recent years, the study of Africa comes with heavy colonial baggage, forcing each and

every undertaking in African Studies to position itself in current debates over decolonization. Built on non-African interests and still mainly advanced by non-African scholars, the field of African Studies needs to engage in profound and critical reflection of its object, its theories, and its methods.

While the cluster is not the place to resolve the issue of who embodies or occupies the space of "African", it is designed as a place where we wrestle with such issues. Therefore, reconfiguring African Studies means, among other things, to address and redress the structural and conceptual framework within which we conduct our scholarly work. Our position at the University of Bayreuth is defined by the fact that the initiators of the cluster are predominantly (though not exclusively) German scholars based at a German university and funded by the German government. *As such*, we seek to develop a new structural set-up and a new conceptual agenda. Therefore, we came to consider it appropriate to think of our endeavor in terms of the reconfiguration of African Studies, in the sense of an attempt to change the structural and conceptual configuration in which African Studies continues to be embedded.
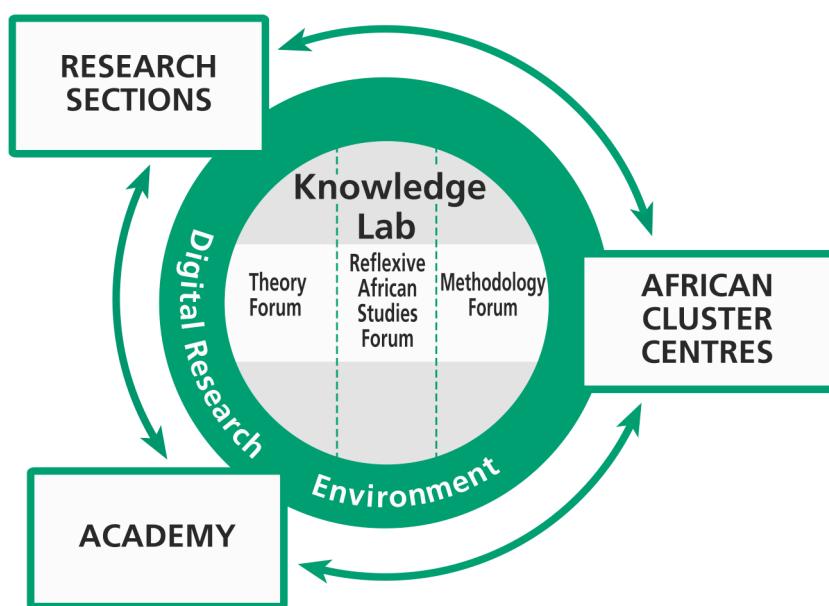

Figure 7

Research Structures of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence

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In our cluster, we insist that the structural and the conceptual reconfiguration need to go hand in hand and actually reinforce each other. Indeed, our structural measures cannot be divorced from the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological dimensions of our agenda. The two major structural steps are:

- the establishment of new forms of research partnership through the African Cluster Centres, supplementing the major research structures of the cluster (Research Sections, Academy, with Knowledge Lab at the core; see Figure 7); and
- our Digital Research Environment, or DRE, which connects all segments of our research infrastructure, offers tools to work jointly with shared databases, and provides working formats reflecting the heterogeneity, complexity, and dynamism of the cluster's research.

There are further crucial elements, of course, such as our measures with regard to gender and diversity. These demonstrate once again how closely the structural and the conceptual components of our agenda are intertwined. Here, our agenda is, among other things, designed to work toward

- addressing structural inequalities in the university setting;
- scrutinizing knowledge production about Africa with regard to gender and diversity;
- establishing the cluster as a space for relationality and reflexivity in African Studies; and toward
- advancing intersectionality and critical diversity theory as conceptual tools in research methodologies.

As we figure out the reconfiguration of African Studies, it is of paramount importance to continuously reflect on the various layers, levels and intricacies of our endeavor. At the same time, we need to keep our focus on the conceptual shift required to steer the study of Africa in new directions.

Talking about the "study of Africa" immediately raises the question, or rather: the problem of how we define the object of our research. What do we mean when we say we "study Africa"? What is the thing we call Africa, anyway? Is it something we can define, that we can posit as "Africa" and then use as a foil to verify or falsify our hypotheses? posit as "Africa" and then use as a foil to verify or falsify our hypotheses? As Elísio Macamo cautions us, studying Africa in this manner "would be tantamount to checking whether what we claim reflects the true nature of the thing called Africa" (2020, 10).

In the cluster proposal, the key term we adopted for our conceptual shift was multiplicity; hence "Africa Multiple" as the name of the cluster. We do not posit multiplicity as the framework for the study of a thing called Africa, but in order to capture the simultaneity of heterogeneous and mutually influential African and African diasporic life worlds. In the proposal, we put forward relationality and reflexivity as the analytical tools for the study and conceptualization of multiplicity. This means that we view the phenomena under study in terms of their relational and reflexive qualities. It is our contention that this approach allows us to transcend the limits of thinking in fixed categories and binaries. In brief, we claim that such a change of perspective is capable of responding to the challenges the field of African Studies is facing at the current juncture.

If this is indeed the case, what exactly does it imply for our own work—other than using multiplicity, relationality, and reflexivity as buzzwords? How can we actually implement these theoretical suppositions in our research? How can we relate them to concepts and debates within our respective academic disciplines, and how can we make them fruitful for our collaboration across disciplines? Without answering these questions, we will hardly abandon the conventional framework of the study of Africa. In other words, there is not much going to be reconfigured unless we figure out how to employ relational and reflexive analytical tools in our work.

3 Toward a Conceptual Shift: The Study of Islam

A good way to start the inquiry into these questions is to scrutinize the premises of knowledge production in our own academic disciplines. What does all this mean with regard to my discipline, the study of Islam? What can Islamic Studies teach us about implementing the conceptual shift?

Let me tackle the matter by introducing you to two recent books. Written by well-established Islamic Studies scholars, they both feature the question "What is Islam" in the title. The first appeared in 2015; the author, Shahab Ahmed was professor at Harvard University and passed away in the same year his book was published. The title of the second book, published in German in 2018, modifies the question in a small but significant detail: "Was ist der Islam?", asks the author Tilman Nagel, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Göttingen until his retirement in 2007. Literally, the title translates as "What is the Islam", which sounds odd in English but not in German, where the question can be asked with or without the definite article ("der").

Shahab Ahmed opens his book with an instructive quote from the 19th-century American poet Walter Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes" (2015, 3). Throughout roughly 600 pages Ahmed takes his readers on a veritable tour de force across Islamic history, sometimes in sharp zigzags and lined with some heavy theory and hermeneutical models. Drawing primarily on South Asian material, he seeks "to locate the logic of difference and contradiction as coherent with and internal to Islam" (ibid., 542). For Ahmed, it is the multitude of Islamic expressions and currents that characterizes Islam, and his purpose is to show "how Islam makes Muslims as Muslims make Islam" (ibid., 543).

Tilman Nagel provides a rather different answer to the question, "What is Islam?". The use of the definite article in the title of his 700-page-response already indicates his conviction that there is a rather specific and clear definition of Islam: It is "a passionately proselytizing, monotheistic, universal religion" that aims "to endow every human being with the only true and eternal relationship with the Divine" (2018, 17). For Nagel, Islam's "intrinsic nature" is entirely incompatible with the fundamentals of a "secular polity" (ibid., 662) He insists that more than anything else, "answering the question 'What is Islam' requires us to turn to the worldview experienced by the founder [i.e., Muhammad] as well as to its historical manifestations" (ibid., 663).

Nagel's reference to historical manifestations should not be misread to imply that Islam might mean different things to different people at different places in different time periods. Rather, Nagel reads Islamic history as the perpetual replication of Muhammad's worldview: the latter inevitably determines how Islam manifests itself in history. Furthermore, according to Nagel, Islam can only be understood by studying its written sources. He emphasizes that the statements made in these sources "need to be taken seriously, and they need to be related to aspirations to political power and social circumstances" (ibid., 6). Such an approach, Nagel maintains, has nothing to do with essentialism, but amounts to a duty for scholars of Islamic Studies who take their responsibility seriously, even if it comes at the risk of violating the conventions of

political correctness (ibid.). "Real" Islam, as it were, emerges directly from the sources; most notably the Qur'an—once more, we are back to the book.

Of course, there are some obvious problems with the read-the-texts-and-you-will-know-Islam-approach. Interestingly, it is not only propagated by the likes of Nagel or some outright Islamophobes, but also by quite a few Muslims who subscribe to literalist readings of Islam. They all maintain—albeit with different motives and intentions—that "real" Islam emerges directly from the sources, thus ignoring the role human agency plays in interpreting and implementing sacred scripture.

As a matter of fact, the spectrum of Islamic religious expression is sufficiently broad to attest to the impact of human agency in Islam's historical manifestations. This is reflected in the categories widely used to describe the Islamic spectrum. For instance, the distinction between "radical" and "moderate" Islam has become a frequent and popular topos in public debates since the rise of contemporary Jihadism. Since the late 1970s, specialists as well as instant experts have contributed to a large and still growing body of literature concerned with "Islamic extremism." A recent addition to the "What is?" book series, on the other hand, is devoted to the question "What is moderate Islam?" (Benkin 2017)

Scholars of Islamic and Religious Studies usually prefer to avoid the "radical-moderate" binary, not least because of the difficulty to establish a clear dividing line between the two. The terms they use instead include fundamentalism, political Islam, and Islamism. Among the corresponding categories we find orthodox Islam, reformist Islam, and modern Islam, which are often juxtaposed with popular Islam, Sufi Islam, and traditional Islam. While scholars of religious studies have critically debated the usefulness of such distinctions for quite some time, some anthropologists replicated the dichotomous model by juxtaposing global and local Islam (see Waardenburg 1979). In the anthropology of Islam, positions ranged from Abdel Hamid El Zein's claim that Islam should best be used in the plural (El Zein 1977) to Talal Asad's influential take on Islam as a "discursive tradition" (Asad 1986) and Samuli Schielke's provocative stance that there is "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam" (Schielke 2010).

Apparently, the object of Islamic Studies is almost as elusive as the object of the study of Africa—unless we content ourselves with Nagel's essentialist conception of a single, eternal Islam. Ahmed, on the other hand, conceives of Islam as a "storehouse of *means and meaning* (…) that are under ongoing production, that are in dynamic co-relation with each other" (2015, 360). The potential variety of meanings notwithstanding, Ahmed still appears to ascribe some inherent and essential features to Islam, as he states that, "Islam, meaning-making for the self and by one-fifth of humanity, is *Islam*—it is not anything else—and should be conceptualized, understood, and appreciated as such" (ibid., 546). Viewing Islam as a storehouse certainly seems more promising than its conceptualization in terms of binaries. However, if we label the entire range of Islamic expression as "Islam and not anything else", we are prone to fall in the same epistemological trap that already seized those who posit "Africa" as an object of study: if we do so, we use "Islam" as the foil against which truth claims can be validated.

What are the analytical alternatives? How can we account for the variety of Islamic religious expressions without falling into these conceptual traps? I will devote the next section to different ways of knowing among Muslims, with the aim of illustrating what the conceptual reconfiguration might look like in this case.

4 Islamic Ways of Knowing

Over the past decade, I have undertaken extensive research on theories and practices of Islamic knowledge in various parts of Africa. It is this research that has led me to question the rather static binaries and fixed categories used in the study of Islam (see Seesemann 2006). Not too long ago, the notion of African" Islam as being "traditional" has been pervasive in academic studies of Islam in Africa. "Traditional", "African" Islam has often been juxtaposed with the purportedly more modern, Middle Eastern Islam. Such views surfaced as early as in the colonial period and are still prominent in recent analyses, including those written after 9/11. They reiterate the colonial *topos* of a peaceful African Islam threatened by dangerous outside influences. Thus, the spectrum of Islam in Africa is often reduced to the pattern of the good Muslim-bad Muslim scheme that has gained worldwide currency after 9/11.

Such views of Islam rely on ideology, whether political or religious, as a criterion to distinguish between Islamic movements and currents. It is here that my research makes a new intervention: What is at stake in contemporary Islamic Africa is only superficially the competition between religious ideologies, and certainly not primarily between African and Middle Eastern ones (see Seesemann 2018). Rather, it is the struggle over epistemologies. Epistemology is here understood as referring to different answers to questions such as, "What does it mean to know?", "How is knowledge constituted?", or "How can truth be attained?". The relationship between different epistemologies expresses itself in controversies between the protagonists involved, but also—as the conceptual move towards a relational perspective demonstrates—in terms of mutual borrowing and blending of knowledge practices.

Based on my research on theories and practices of Islamic knowledge, conducted in Mauritania, Senegal, Sudan, and Kenya, I have identified three key terms that describe different conceptions of knowledge and ways of knowing (see Seesemann 2018 and forthcoming). The first is

- the *sanad*, literally "support"; here referring to the chain of transmission
- the second is the *dalīl*, i.e., the evidence;
- and the third is *maqāṣid*, the purposes or objectives.

The three terms correlate with specific modalities of knowledge production and different approaches to Islamic scripture. I further propose to identify them with three Islamic currents that can be called, by way of a working definition, traditionalist, reformist, and Islamist. In the following, I will also speak of them as paradigms and describe them with these attributes, which, however, are explicitly not conceived as fixed categories. Rather, they constitute complex patterns that continuously evolve through mutual exchange and overlaps.

The *sanad* or chain of transmission historically played a prominent role in the Islamic science of Hadith, i.e., the narrations about the Prophet and his Companions. Here the chain is known by the technical term *isnad*. Each report of a statement or action by the Prophet Muhammad is related together with the names of the persons who transmitted the report. What guarantees its authenticity is the reliability of the transmitters as well as their unbroken chain all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad. In the traditionalist paradigm, this principle forms the basis for the transmission of religious knowledge. Knowledge, according to this conception, does not reside in texts, but is embodied in the human beings who preserve and implement it. Accordingly, it can only be transmitted from "breast to breast", as a famous adage puts it. This is illustrated by an aphorism ascribed to Malik ibn Anas, the eighth-century founder of the eponymous Maliki School of Jurisprudence: "Knowledge should only be acquired from one who has memorized [the text], who has himself kept company with the scholars, who has put his knowledge into practice, and who possesses piety" (as quoted in Wright 2015, 35).

Figure 8 Photo by Rüdiger Seesemann

Therefore, in the traditionalist paradigm it is not the text itself that plays the crucial part, but the master who passes on the text he has memorized, and who, in turn, has received the text from his master. Figure 8 shows a Qur'an school near Sennar on the Blue Nile in Sudan: the teacher uses locally made erasable ink to write verses from the Qur'an on a wooden slate. The students then memorize the verses written on the slate. There are schools where students commit the entire Qur'an to memory, only to receive a *sanad* listing the names of all masters involved in the transmission, all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad, the Angel Gabriel, and God. The traditionalist paradigm is thus distinguished by that fact that the chain of transmission, rather than the text itself, guarantees the authenticity of knowledge.

The primacy of the master and the extensive memorization of texts constitute characteristic features of traditionalist educational institutions up to the present day. In many places in Islamic Africa, those in search of higher Islamic education attend a learning circle, known as *ḥalaqa*. This term is derived from the half-circle students form when seated around their master (Figure 9). Such

Figure 9 Photo by Rüdiger Seesemann

learning circles may be attended by
knowledge seekers of all ages, and
they may also convene in mosques,
where they study basic works from
the canon of the Islamic sciences
under the guidance of qualified
masters. As shown in Figure 10,
taken in Northern Cameroon, such
lessons may also be held in the
courtyard of a master's home.

There is ample evidence in histori-
cal sources that this style of knowl-
edge transmission goes back to the
formative period of Islam. Although

Figure 10 Photo by Ahmed Khalid Ayong, used with permission

never static, the teaching methods only underwent major changes after the introduction of the
printing press. Nevertheless, the epistemological premise expressed in the reliance on the *sanad*
has remained stable up to the present day.
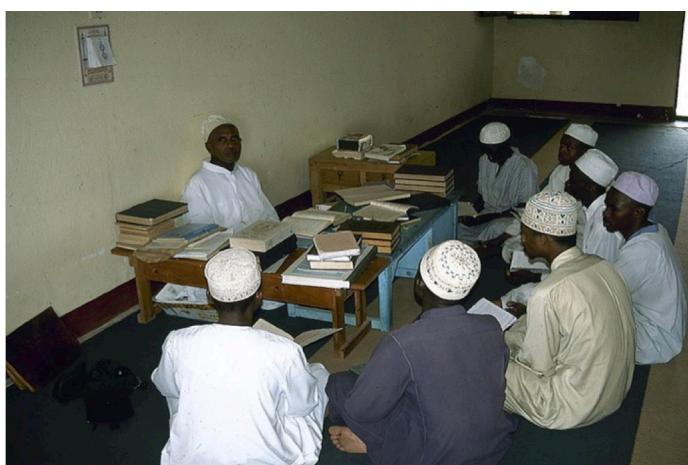
Figure 11 Photo by Rüdiger Seesemann

In the leading traditionalist school
in Kenya, the *Madrasat al Manbaʿ
al-Rawwī* in Mambrui on the Indian
Ocean, the *ḥalaqa* has been devel-
oped further (see Seesemann
2016). Figure 11 shows a group of
senior students surrounding their
master, Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Bayḍ,
the director of the school until his
death in early 2013 and scion of a
family originally from Hadramawt
in the southern Arabian Peninsula.
He adapted the teaching method of
the *ḥalaqa*: instead of all students

studying the same book at the same time, each student follows an individual curriculum, while
still maintaining the enduring principle of person-to-person knowledge transmission.

It is precisely this crucial principle of personal transmission that is undermined in the second
episteme, the *dalīl* paradigm. Here, the primacy of the evidence (drawn from the text) super-
sedes the primacy of the master (as the repository of the text). The principal method that au-
thenticates knowledge in this paradigm is called *istidlāl*, i.e., the search for the evidence (*dalīl*)
contained in the scripture.

The Wahhābiyya and the Salafiyya are among the Islamic currents that put a particularly strong
emphasis on this method. Their protagonists only consider as "correct" knowledge those teach-

ings and practices that are corroborated by textual evidence in the Qur'an and the Hadith. This conception of knowledge has wide ramifications: knowledge seekers may access the text directly without the mediation of a master. Everybody capable of reading may extract the evidence from the sources, at least in theory. Accordingly, the *dalīl* replaces the *sanad* as the tool required to validate knowledge as authentic. If everything has been laid out in a plain and transparent manner in the scripture, as the advocates of the evidence hold, there is no need for the elaborate commentaries and explications offered by traditionalist authorities. In addition, the promotion of direct access to the text comes at the expense of certain competences that go hand in hand with personal knowledge transmission. Learning at the feet of the master also implies the acquisition of a specific habitus (*adab*) and the mimetic appropriation of behavioral patterns. The text-based approach to knowledge thus comes at the expense of character formation based on experiential knowledge acquisition.

The *dalīl* paradigm not only changes the modality of knowing, but also brings structural and institutional transformations. The *madrasa*, literally "school", replaces the learning circle as the paradigmatic site of learning. Here, students learn with their age-mates; lessons are given in classrooms and follow a standardized curriculum aimed at the transmission of discursive knowledge. In the second half of the twentieth century, schools like the one in Northern Cameroon shown in Figure 12 became important agents in spreading a reformist understanding of Islam all over Islamic Africa.

Figure 12 Photo by Ahmed Khalid Ayong, used with permission

The two paradigms discussed so far have recently been joined by a third paradigm. The keyword that best describes it is *maqāṣid* (sing. *maqṣad*), which can be translated as purposes or objectives. Like the *dalīl*, the *maqāṣid* originate from the toolkit of Islamic jurisprudence. Thus, they have a long history, even though they have been interpreted and applied in new ways in the modern period. The term refers to a jurisprudential method used to identify the purposes behind a specific injunction of the Sharia (Islamic Law). These purposes are used as the yardstick to determine the benefit (*maṣlaḥa*), or else the harm or detriment (*mafsada*), of a particular action. They are thus used to complement established legal rules and normative injunctions.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Islamic intellectuals—many of whom are not classically trained Islamic scholars—have adapted this method and turned it into the principal modality that guides the search for correct knowledge in projects of Islamic renewal. Their method consisted of the inference of general ethical injunctions from the Qur'an and the Hadith, thus extending the realm of the application of the classical *maqāṣid* method. The point is the spirit of the law, not the letter. In so doing, Islamist intellectuals turned the *maqāṣid* into a tool designed to

radically reconsider the relationship between Islam and modernity. Ḥasan al-Turābī (1932-2016), the leading Islamist in the Sudan in the late twentieth century, defined the premises of the new *maqāṣid* paradigm as follows: "Changes in circumstances necessarily call for changes in the forms of religious expression. (…) With a few exceptions reflecting the eternal components of the divine message, everything can be reviewed [in order to create] a new model which unites the eternal principles with the changing reality" (al-Turābī as paraphrased in El-Affendi 1998, 408-409).

This amounts to a radical change of the epistemic basis for the definition of Islamic knowledge. In this conception, "knowledge" may comprise everything that is beneficial to Islam, as long as it can be justified with the spirit of the text. The *maqāṣid* paradigm thus reverses the direction of the traditionalist paradigm: using this method, non-Islamic knowledge, including modern science, can be "Islamized" and can therefore do without a chain of transmitters. Here, knowledge is not handed down as in the *sanad* paradigm, but taken back to its purported Islamic roots. Moreover, Islamist epistemology not only dispenses with the *sanad*, but also does not depend on the textual evidence in the scripture, because the statements in the texts are interpreted according to the purported intention or purpose, not the literal meaning.

So far, my cursory overview of theories and practices of Islamic knowledge has privileged the differences between the three paradigms. I have done so in order to support my contention that focusing on epistemological patterns offers an analytical alternative to the binaries and dichotomies still used so often to conceptualize Islam. Identifying these patterns allows us to bring some order into the "storehouse" Shahab Ahmed calls Islam. After all, it does make a difference whether knowledge is validated by the personal authority embodying the text, or by the evidence contained in the text, or by the ethical intention behind the text.

Ultimately, the three paradigms presented here may even help to generate new answers to the question "What is Islam?". Likewise, it would be worthwhile to explore the relational research questions that arise from the perspective developed here. To be clear, I do not conceive of the three paradigms as entities that are first fixed and subsequently enter into relations. Taking a relational approach means to view these patterns as the products of relations and reflexive processes, where reference to the patterns becomes itself a major factor in processes of relating. As such, the three paradigms evolve within the entire spectrum of conflict, rejection, convergence, adaptation, appropriation, and mutual borrowing (see further Seesemann 2018).

Figuring out the conceptual reconfiguration therefore means, in this case, to identify and analyze the multi-layered and multi-directional relations and references as they play out in the formation and transformation of Islamic ways of knowing. Taking such an approach to Islamic knowledge—or to other phenomena in African or African diasporic life worlds—will allow us to get a better understanding of the processes through which phenomena emerge and change, and, at the same time, helps us to avoid presumptions about the substantive nature of the phenomena under study. If we proceed in this manner, we do not study a thing called Islam or a thing called Africa, but rather zoom in on their continuous construction and identify their underlying historical, epistemological, social, political, and spatial references.

5 Conclusion

The study of Islam, this should have become clear by now, is no less of an intellectual minefield than the study of Africa. In both fields, navigating the ideological and epistemological pitfalls remains a challenge. The reflections I shared with you about the object of our research and about theory and methods clearly underscore that it is high time for a substantial change of perspective.

When contemplating our University of Bayreuth logo, it occurred to me that it might actually easily accommodate a telescope, rather than a book (Figure 13). The colonial gaze would use this telescope to zoom in on the thing called "Africa", preferably from many different angles and directions.

Figure 13 © Mathias Süß, Dadaluxe

Now, the University of Bayreuth takes great pride in its African Studies focus area, and we would certainly not identify our agenda with zooming in on the African continent as if it were a container. Rather, our work has long been guided by the credo, "Research on Africa only with Africa," and it is no exaggeration to say that we filled this credo with a lot of life in the past, most notably in the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. Building on this formidable basis, we now have the opportunity to open up new perspectives on Africa: We have the unique opportunity to combine theories, methods, and epistemological premises from a wide range of academic disciplines, in order to explore and analyze the multiple, relational, and reflexive ways in which the African life worlds we study intersect and co-constitute each other (Figure 14).


Figure 14 © Mathias Süß, Dadaluxe

Perhaps I have disappointed those who were expecting high-flying theory today. Certainly, we will need to have many more conversations about our theoretical superstructure. Yet as we go along, it will be equally crucial for us to figure out what the conceptual reconfiguration means for our own research. I hope that the case of Islamic epistemologies has provided some leads in

this direction. If we succeed in implementing the conceptual shift in our individual and collective work—that is, the shift away from the epistemological premises of the colonial library—we will have taken a huge step toward the reconfiguration of African Studies.

To conclude, let me emphasize that the reconfiguration of African Studies is more than a change of perspective. Reconfiguring African Studies touches on the structural level no less than on the conceptual level. This explains the central role played by our structural measures, especially but not limited to the Digital Research Environment and the African Cluster Centres, for the collective knowledge production we seek to realize. It is through new forms of digital research collaboration that we will eventually establish our postcolonial digital African Studies library. Our "Africa Multiple library" will be the product of multiple relations, and of the knowledge production pursued jointly by the cluster partners in Nigeria, Kenya, Burkina Faso, South Africa and Germany. We are privileged to have this opportunity, and I am confident we will achieve great results.

I wish all of us a multiple, relational, and reflexive New Year!

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