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African Knowledges and the History Public*ation

Summary

Heightened turmoil in the realm of global knowledge production has recently stimulated questions leading to research on inequalities and relationalities within the academy; between universities in the “Global South” and “Global North”; as well as between experts and non-experts in a given society. The Junior Research Group “African Knowledges and the History Publication since the 1970s” suggests that the discipline of (African) History, with its sustained contestations over who qualifies as the ideal narrator of the past; what qualifies as a “proper” primary source; its conceptualisation time; and the politics of the archive, to name some examples, presents a particularly rich foundation for exploring this landscape. Associated research projects work at the intersection of processes of production, dissemination, usage and preservation of fluid medialities in line with African knowledge systems.

Key Questions

How power enters the production of history is a critical but underexplored topic in the field. In his book *Silencing the Past* (1995) Michel-Rolph Trouillot locates four crucial points within the struggle to leave a lasting “record”: 1) “the making of sources”; 2) “the making of archives”; 3) “the making of narratives”; and 4) “the making of history in the final instance”.

Furthermore, the book deals “with the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such productions” (xxiii). Using a media-centred approach, we want to explore interrelations between producers of history in public, popular and academic spheres on the continent. How do their works interact (or not)? Consulting a wide range of sources such as academic journals of historical societies, television programs and social media output, we desire to explore what particular lessons can be drawn about the medialities of specific forms of media, whether material or immaterial. What interrelations and gaps exist between history writing, popular conceptions of the past, and heritage making? What implications do these insights have for the future of the discipline?

Methods and Concepts

In order to explore the intellectual, practical, and affectual forces underlying as processes of historical knowledge production, validation and dissemination within complex African

knowledge systems, we deploy a range of interdisciplinary approaches ranging from media studies, heritage studies, digital humanities and conventional historical methods. Applying inter- and transdisciplinary research concepts and sources ranging from archival materials such as the journals of historical societies and history departments (in West-, East and Southern Africa) in the 1960s to 1990, to “unorthodox” source materials such as digitized historical public television tapes of the 1980s and social media output in the 21st century, we want to see how these materials enable and reflect specific narrations of the past and shape the historical understanding of that peculiar time as well as how diverse communities make sense of their pasts together.

Vision

Posing the question of how can our understanding of knowledge production be shifted for the sake of a better future, we want to contribute to debates on Africa-centred knowledge(s); touchpoints between memory (incl. forgetting and recalling of events) and history; the “work” history does in the public sphere; co-production between community members and the academy; North-South collaborations; digital humanities for Africa; “postcolonial” African archives; peace & the preservation of the past. Furthermore, we seek to contribute to a more inclusive global research community by critically engaging with epistemological bias and epistemic injustice within the consulted sources and methodologies, as well as following open access publishing strategies of knowledge sharing.

Contribution to the Cluster’s Aims & Goals

The Junior Research Group “African Knowledges and the History Public*ation” proposes that the centring and illumination of Africa-based historical productions can help to reconfigure African studies. Making accessible and theorizing over these bodies of knowledge helps to broaden conceptualisations of the past and exhibits how such knowledge may transform as we move toward and with society. Amongst other things, we propose that in order to capture local practices and content related to historical knowledge transmission, it is necessary to move beyond the printed word to analyse other forms of media, whether audio or visual. It is in this rich multiplicity of intellectual expression (popular, public, scientific, etc.) that Africa-based African Studies serve as a potential model for how to “Reconfigure African Studies” (globally) and break away from Western hegemony in (historical) knowledge production.

The Junior Research Group is also actively helping to preserve a regional archive in Liberia. It is digitising video material from that country’s only public broadcasting station in the 1980s. Following consultations with the Cluster’s Digital Solutions section, and until his unexpected death, Richard Anyah played a very active role in creating related metadata for the Cluster’s WissKI system.

PROJECT TEAM



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Further Links

Find more information here:

<https://www.historicalculturesofafrica.org/>

<http://www.historicalsocietylib.org/>