

## *Who needs Nordic African Studies?*

A presentation for a Round Table organized by the Nordic Africa Research Network (NARN) on "Nordic Africa Research Co-operation: Options and Obstacles" at the Development Research Conference (5-6 November 2015), School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg

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This talk will address reasons why African Studies is and continues to be an important field of academic practices (research, teaching, public engagement) in the Nordic region. I want to make three points: First, that Nordic societies need knowledge about Africa; second, that the myopic eurocentricity of current policy thinking obliges Nordic Africanists to strategically defend our unique traditions; and third, that both of these previous points imply the need for proactive engagement with non-Africanists in our various academic disciplines to resist the ghettoization of African Studies.

*1. Nordic societies need African Studies primarily in order that we might keep abreast of the intellectual, cultural and political developments in the most dynamic and future-oriented region on our planet*

It is well known that a number of African economies are among the fastest-growing on the planet. It is also evident that much of this growth has been linked to Chinese investments in and demand for primary commodities (which is likely to decline as China's growth slows), and that the benefits of aggregate GNP growth have not trickled down to alleviate the poverty of most Africans. Despite these caveats, there is much evidence that Africa will continue to be an incredibly dynamic continent in the next few decades. Not only economically, but culturally and politically as well. Rising incomes, however enclavic, have created growing demands for greater economic and social justice. At the same time, high levels of social, economic and political frustration are feeding domestic instability as well as international mobility. Africa is undergoing profound transformations, and these changes will continue to spill across boundaries – as political demands, cultural creativity and massive displacement.

The Nordic region is no longer a distant observer of Africa's transformations. It obviously behooves our societies to keep track of the continent's crises – political, economic, social, and ecological – since these have increasingly immediate impact on our own societies. But it is also important to think about Africa beyond crisis, and to recognize that Nordic policy leaders can benefit substantially from a close appreciation of Africa's societal innovations.

As the Nordic welfare model is incrementally eroded by neoliberalism at home, two decades of neoliberal policies have fueled growing political demands for redistributive politics across Africa. While Nordic and African political trends may seem to be moving in opposite directions – Africa's populism tends to lean left while in Europe, it has swerved sharply to the right – both trajectories evince the difficulties that parliamentary democracy faces when

attempting to manage the unpredictability of late capitalist economic cycles and the social disparities they produce. Political commonsense among Nordic scholars and journalists has long nurtured the arrogance that ‘African politics’ represent an immature, corrupt and degraded form of liberalism – sets of ideas and practices, that is, with no immediate relevance to Nordic realities. Now, as Nordic societies are increasingly confronted with deep social divisions, and with the hardening of exclusionary structures, we may need to study more closely how societies like South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Ethiopia, Zambia and Tanzania have managed to maintain stability, and nurture significant economic growth, under even harsher conditions of economic crisis, social fragmentation and polarization.

*2. Nordic African Studies is not, and will never be, a mainstream field of scholarship. With diminishing public investments in research in the social sciences and the humanities, and especially in non-European concerns, the consolidation and coordination of Africanist research efforts across the Nordic region becomes increasingly important.*

As far as I can tell, the only full-scale dedicated African Studies programme in the Nordic region is in Copenhagen. In addition to Copenhagen, NAI, Roskilde and Trondheim are AEGIS members, but Trondheim only offers AS at the BA level (within anthropology), Roskilde (as far as I know) offers no specific AS specialization and NAI, in Uppsala, for all its many merits, offers no academic degrees at all. Research clusters focused on Africa can be found out in several anthropology, geography and politics departments across the region, and there are individual Nordic African specialists in departments of environmental studies, law, linguistics, public health, social policy and theology, and so on, not to mention high-level experts based in government ministries and non-governmental organizations.

The Nordic region, then, is rich in Africanist expertise, but Nordic African Studies is weakly institutionalized as a field of academic practice. This may not seem like much of a problem to those of us securely tenured in a conventional disciplinary setting, but the genuine threat to NAI’s funding a couple of years ago (which saw the departure of Denmark as a funding partner) clearly revealed the fragility of AS as a field of academic practice. Imagine Nordic African Studies without NAI and what now appears as a vibrant matrix of scholars would look more like a tattered spider’s web after a violent storm. At the moment, individual scholars and students in places like Linköping or Jyväskylä can undertake an Africanist project with some confidence because NAI’s excellent library and related support structures suggest the framework of a Nordic academic community with continuity and commitment. I pray that the recent funding scare was a mere passing blip, but even if NAI’s future proves to be secure there is no doubt that public funding for ‘marginal’ fields is greatly endangered by current austerity policies. The social sciences and the humanities are especially vulnerable. This is eminently clear when one scans the current crop of H2020 initiatives where Africa is virtually absent, and the SSH are explicitly cast in a subsidiary role to knowledge production priorities in which engineers and exact scientists are bequeathed the leading roles. My anxieties have not been assuaged by the fact that, ostensibly due to budget cuts, the Academy of Finland cancelled its dedicated Development Studies funding call this year (two weeks before the deadline!), a major source of funding for independent Finnish African Studies.

Against this background, NARN is a welcome initiative, but we need to do more than just collect membership fees and organize the odd roundtable; The vulnerability of our field demands that we need to go further than network organizations generally do. As difficult as it may be, I think it would be wise for Africanist scholars dispersed across Nordic universities to repress deeply rooted ‘protectionist’ tendencies and try to envision cross-boundary institutional structures. The report on Nordic cooperation speaks very clearly: Links among our national institutions are weaker than those to other regions. This is a recipe for a *sauve-qui-peut* scenario if and when the funding axes fall in earnest on our national AS resources.

I don’t have a well-thought through proposal but I think there are several avenues worth exploring. One is the Erasmus Mundus / Marie Curie (?) initiative for developing joint degree programmes. These can, and probably should (in order to be competitive) involve some non-Nordic partners, but it could have a positive institutional impact if stronger links could be established among departments and programmes across the region. These need not be generalist African Studies MDPs, but could build on Nordic strengths in, say, environmental studies, public health or development anthropology. I believe there is also a Nordic Council funding window available which could allow for inter-institutional doctoral courses.

*3. While conversation and collaboration with African scholars remains vital to the relevance and vitality of Nordic African Studies, it is increasingly important to ensure that Africanists in Nordic academic institutions cultivate links to mainstream fields of study in their own universities (and abroad).*

I suspect that most Nordic Africanists work in conventional disciplinary contexts. I also suspect that it is more the rule than the exception that Africanists are only weakly integrated into the departmental profiles of their host disciplines. I would like to suggest that this autonomy enhances the vulnerability of our field. It is unfortunate in at least two ways. On the one hand, for reasons I touched on earlier, it is of great importance that non-Africanist scholars are kept apprised of the nature and global importance of the many transformative processes at work in contemporary African societies. It is important for the health and vitality of our disciplinary foundations.

Greater integration into disciplinary contexts is also important for strategic reasons. In Finland at least, we are seeing a major restructuring of the institutional landscape of academic knowledge production. In the name of reducing administrative overheads (among other justifications), university managements are in the process of amalgamating faculties, creating massive units that are described (via vague euphemism) as ‘interdisciplinary.’

Many colleagues view this restructuring with apprehension – primarily perhaps, because amalgamation and the reduction of ‘redundant’ administrative staff is not likely to reduce the aggregate volume of administrative burdens, which must then be shouldered by academic staff. The reorganization of working contexts can have unintended positive outcomes, however, as scholars are obliged to recognize and interact with unfamiliar styles of knowledge production. I suggest that inasmuch as these trends affect Nordic Africanists more generally, that we use this opportunity to deepen collaboration with colleagues working in the

mainstream of their disciplinary settings. It is time to bring our Africanist concerns into the core of research and teaching programmes. This can mean that we must also broaden our horizons beyond our familiar geographical niches and hone our capacities for comparative analysis across very different contextual borders. This can, I believe, have both strategic and substantive benefits.