

REPORT: 7TH EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN STUDIES ONCE IN A LIFETIME EXPERIENCE (BASEL, 29.06.–01.07.2017)

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“Urban Africa – Urban Africans. New encounters of the urban and the rural.” This was the title of the 7th biennial European Conference on African Studies at the University of Basel, which attracted more than 1500 scholars from all over the world. The Centre for African Studies Basel, which is member of the Research Network AEGIS (Africa Europe Group of Interdisciplinary Studies) was honoured to host the convention. This once in a lifetime experience aimed to bring together scholars and to foster, to deepen, to improve and to facilitate the exchanges of knowledge among Africanists.

In 204 thematic panels, 1046 presentations, 13 movie screenings, 13 meetings, 18 book launches, 10 round table discussions, the processes and the consequences of urbanisation in Africa were discussed. These different platforms reflected the multifaceted approaches and the diversity of the research methods in the field. With almost 70% of academics from Europe, 20% from Africa, 8% from North America and 2% from Asia, Latin America and Australia, an intercontinental scholarly exchange was ensured.

The arts and culture program alongside the ECAS with the festival for contemporary art in the RDC “Kongo am Rhein”, the guided walking tour through Basel “Afrika Safari”, the festival “A*piece of street”, concerts with jazz from South Africa and many more events on Africa, brought the African continent visually and rhythmically into the city.

Many factors made for the success of ECAS in Basel. Along with the accomplishment of the knowledge exchange; the very informative keynote lectures, the interesting



The rich publishers' exhibition attracted much attention (picture: Kathrin Schulthess).

round table discussions and the instructive panels, the ECAS was very well organized. Key in this were about 70 volunteers who assisted the delegates wherever they could and contributed to a good atmosphere.

“... EVERY PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCED A TOTALLY DIFFERENT CONFERENCE”

A mon humble avis, ECAS 7 a su coupler réussite et professionnalisme. En effet, plus d'un sont unanimes sur ce point attestant de la très bonne organisation de cette conférence surtout marquée par le professionnalisme des volontaires. Leurs dynamismes, leurs disponibilités et leurs humeurs très conviviale sont à saluer. Omniprésents, ils faisaient du mieux possible pour trouver des réponses précises aux différentes préoccupations des participants avec toujours le sourire.

A big number of Africanists travelled to Basel, a beautiful city in Switzerland, where the Centre for African Studies Basel and the Swiss Society for African Studies warmly

Salle bondée pendant la conférence principale de Joyce Nyairo (photo: Simon Bielander).

welcomed us. Most conference participants were easily recognizable in the streets of Basel: not only did many of them wear African jewellery or African clothing, everybody was equipped with an identical black and orange 'ECAS 2017' bag and an orange key cord. This recognizability made it easy to engage in conversations with fellow Africanists and sometimes you suddenly found yourself talking to someone whose book(s) you have read, while at other times you learned about new topics and innovative research methodologies from someone whom you had never heard of before.

Since most people do not attend a conference for the academic activities only, the additional (evening) programme such as the festival 'Kongo am Rhein' and the South African Jazz concerts offered a great possibility to see old friends—or to meet new ones. The daily lunch- and coffee breaks of course also allowed for this, as did the (informal) drinks at the end of the day.

Considering all things that conference participants could engage in, it is understandable that every ECAS participant has experienced a totally different conference. Over the course of three days, a delegate could attend nine panels, but there were so many panels to choose from! The only thing that everybody (or at least, most participants) experienced collectively, was the plenary sessions: four keynote lectures.

La salle bondée illustre fidèlement l'intérêt que manifestaient les participants pour les conférences principales. Les thématiques étaient toutes aussi captivantes les unes que les autres.



KEYNOTE LECTURES

The first keynote, the Carl Schlettwein Lecture, was held by Professor Mirjam de Bruijn, from the African Studies Centre Leiden. In her lecture, with the title "Digitalization and the Field of African Studies," she emphasized that digitalization invites scholars to co-create knowledge because informants are able to respond (much quicker) and engage in debates about (and within!) academia, but that this does not mean that power relations and hierarchies disappear. In addition, the 'digital divide' persists: not everyone has access to the technologies that allow for (online) participation. Many participants stayed around after the lecture to have a drink and discuss the new possibilities and future research ideas informed by (the use of) technologies and digitalization processes.

Mirjam de Bruijn nous a transporté dans l'univers de l'urbanisation en Afrique avec comme porte d'entrée les rapides changements technologiques par le biais du téléphone portable.



Mirjam de Bruijn presenting the first keynote lecture (picture: Simon Bielander).

The second keynote, the much contested Lugard lecture, was presented by Elísio Macamo, Professor of African Studies and director of the African Studies Centre at the University of Basel. His lecture, entitled “Urbane Scholarship: Studying Africa, Understanding the World,” focused on the importance of reflection and awareness about knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and the way(s) in which academics—especially Africanists—‘do science’. Among many other things, he mentioned the importance of acknowledging someone like Frederick Lugard—a colonial administrator—as an ancestor who provides him (Elísio Macamo) with the possibility to critique, stand on his (Lugard’s) shoulders and take responsibility for the choices that he makes today. This, precisely because of these entanglements of the discipline of African Studies with our shared dark past. Elísio Macamo thus discussed a tension that profoundly shapes the ways in which scholars practice African Studies today.

L’allocution d’Elísio Macamo a cherché à répondre à la question de départ « What is the point of African Studies ? ». Macamo postule que l’étude de l’Afrique doit être plutôt fermement enracinée dans des revendications plus larges sur la condition humaine que sur la spécificité de l’Afrique et les avantages immédiats à tirer des préoccupations en lien avec le développement et le bien-être en Afrique.



Elísio Macamo presenting his keynote “Urbane Scholarship: Studying Africa, Understanding the World” (picture: Simon Bielander).



Joyce Nyairo during her keynote lecture (picture: Simon Bielander)

La troisième conférence principale avec le titre « Urban Africa, Urban Africans: Binds, Boundaries and Belonging » fut présentée par Joyce Nyairo. Cette chercheuse indépendante travaillant sur les projets de mémoire culturelle pour mieux analyser l'Afrique moderne, a opté pour des « lunettes sociologiques » qui lui ont permis d'observer le changement généralisé dans les notions d'identité et d'appartenance à partir du cas du Kenya d'une part et de l'Afrique de l'Est d'autre part. En effet, la croissance économique galopante observée dans cette région de l'Afrique a fortement contribué à ce changement. Pour illustrer cette notion de modernité, elle décortique les pratiques actuelles des funérailles afin de mieux construire le concept d'Africains « détribalisés ».

In her keynote lecture, Joyce Nyairo elaborated on street children in Eldoret (Kenya) and the ways in which they manage to connect (to each other) by making use of rituals and specific ways of engaging in particular relationships. They exclude and create differences between different groups of street children yet at the same time their interactions mirror the ways in which other Kenyans relate to each other. Joyce Nyairo argued that it would be good to learn from the ways in which street children relate and create groups because this seems to be a much more inclusive process than in the rest of Kenyan society, of which they themselves also form part.

The fourth and last keynote was presented by Professor Edgar Pieterse, director of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. His lecture, entitled “The Politics of Governing African Urban Space,” dealt with the ways in which urban governance can become more inclusive and sustainable. He urged us to use our imagination in an attempt to collectively conceive of the kinds of cities in which we would want to live and which innovations are subsequently needed in order to actually create these kinds of cities.

Cette intervention s'est donnée pour but d'explorer l'imaginaire politique et les innovations qui pourraient mobiliser les chercheurs afin de développer des pistes de réflexion pouvant contribuer à la réinvention de la gouvernance urbaine. Par ailleurs, l'innovation technique des conférences principales a été le sous-titrage qui permettait une facilitation de la compréhension des communications.

As the topics of the plenary sessions already show: the conference dealt with a wide range of topics, all related to the urban and African Studies. Engaging with these themes with so many Africanists at once, was a very inspiring and enjoyable experience! There was enough time to meet people and exchange ideas during the delicious lunches and convivial drinks—not to mention all the productive discussion and debates that took place during each of the panels.



Fourth and last keynote lecture by Edgar Pieterse (picture: Mbaraka Matitu).

ECAS 7 disposait d'une diversité de choix. Films, panels, tables rondes, les participants ne pouvaient que "savourer". Cette pluralité qui offrait généreusement une large palette de choix répondait à un double intérêt : proposer un contenu neuf et faciliter la création et le renforcement de réseaux scientifiques.

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DAS SCHÖNSTE AN DER ECAS7 IN BASEL? ECAS IN BASEL!

Peut-on comparer les deux dernières éditions de la conférence ECAS avec l'ECAS 7 à Bâle ? Mais bien sûr, suivant la vue de Susann Ludwig, une jeune chercheuse, qui a participé à ECAS 5, 6 et 7.

ECAS 5, LISSABON 2013

Erst zwei Monate vorher hatte ich mit dem Doktorat in Basel begonnen, die ECAS 5 war meine erste Konferenzteilnahme und für mich ging es vor allem um das Kennenlernen des Konferenzbetriebs, Kollegen und Kolleginnen, aktueller Debatten und Networking. Lissabon war herrlich warm, der Himmel voller Flugzeuge, die Tage voller Panelsessions. Beliebtester Gesprächseinstieg: „Hey! Nice to meet you. What are you working on?“

ECAS 6, PARIS 2015

Zusammen mit meiner Kollegin Maïke Birzle präsentiere ich an der Sorbonne (wow!) Ergebnisse aus meiner Forschung zu Jungdiplomierten in Bamako, Mali. Es gibt ein Wiedersehen mit Kollegen und Kolleginnen aus Lissabon, organisierte Lunchmeetings und Kaffee aus Camelbags. Die meistgestellten Fragen: „Hey! How are you? Are you presenting?“

ECAS 7, BASEL 2017

ECAS 7, meine dritte ECAS zu Hause in Basel. Das bedeutet: keine neue Stadt, keine Anreiseplanung, kein AirBnB, keine U-Bahn, kein Konferenztourismus und stattdessen Aufwachen im eigenen Bett, mit dem Velo in fünf Minuten zum Kollegengebäude und danach bekannte, lachende Gesichter sehen, Staff-Members abklatschen und mit frischem Kaffee das erste Panel des Tages besuchen. Vier Tage lang Kolleginnen und Freunde von überall wiedersehen, neu kennenlernen und begrüßen mit den Worten:

„Hey, welcome to Basel! So good to see you! Enjoy!“; Vorträge und Keynotes hören und diskutieren, zwischendurch selber präsentieren, gemeinsam mit Kollegin Maïke Birzle ein Panel leiten und währenddessen getragen werden vom einzigartigen Wohlfühlgroove der Konferenz. Zuletzt dann die Abschlusspräsentation im grossen Hörsaal des Kollegiengebäudes, die Abschlussparty im Volkshaus und das Abschiedsfrühstück in der Markthalle, die alle wirkten, als hätte niemand gewollt, dass die ECAS wirklich zu Ende geht. ECAS 7 in Basel... It's been real. Danke an alle Beteiligten und das gesamte ECAS-Team!

Susann Ludwig recently submitted her PHD thesis on “Opening up la chance – Futures of university graduates in Bamako, Mali” at the Center for African Studies, University of Basel. She has a background in African Languages, Literatures and Art in Africa (BA from the University of Bayreuth) and Social and Cultural Anthropology (MA from the Martin-Luther-University Halle–Wittenberg). Contact: susann.ludwig@unibas.ch.

Conference Dinner at the Volkshaus (picture: Simon Bielander).



“ECAS OFFERED THE UNIQUE CHANCE TO ENGAGE WITH YOUNG RESEARCHERS IN LIVELY AND FRUITFUL DISCUSSIONS ...”

The conference’s programme was tremendously rich, stimulating and exciting. ECAS presented young scholars like myself with the unique opportunity to engage with research of scholars based at a variety of African, European and American institutions and of various disciplines in a vibrant atmosphere. The inspiring keynote lectures as well as the numerous round table discussions, film sessions, panels or book launches provided an ideal setting for discussing theoretical issues, methods and current research findings, and for critically reflecting on one’s own work. The panels formed the heart of the programme, of which there were over two hundred to choose from. The panel on “Identity and Soldiering: Making Armies in Southern Africa” hosted by JoAnn McGregor (University of Sussex) and Jocelyn Alexander (University of Oxford) as well as Giorgio Miescher’s (University of Basel) panel “Lines of Control – Lines of Desire: Towards an Integrated History of Fencing in Southern Africa” definitely were among my personal highlights. Not only did they engage with questions and issues relevant for my own research project, but they also provided me with new, thought-provoking insights and made me reconsider some of my earlier assumptions. It was a great pleasure listening to so many other young researchers, particularly those working on Southern African history, presenting their projects. ECAS offered the unique chance to engage with them in lively and fruitful discussions—both during the panels and outside the event venues.

The organisers had made sure that there were plenty of opportunities to do so throughout the whole conference: during a coffee break in the morning or afternoon, during lunch, while making one’s way through the book fair or by joining in on the extensive arts and cultural programme accompanying the conference.



Round Table RT09 “Africa versus the West: The challenge of reciprocal comparisons in the study of Africa” (picture: Simon Bielander).

FILM SESSIONS

The film sessions were also among my personal conference highlights. The sessions allowed for viewing historical as well as contemporary issues from a different angle. They invited to engage with and critically discuss research methods and ways of narrating different to the ones I am accustomed to as a historian. I particularly enjoyed the documentary portraying the work of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) in South Africa, presented by Andrea Bieler and critically commented by Rita Kesselring (both University of Basel).

Tout d'abord, la plage horaire à laquelle les films étaient projetés, semblait émaner d'une minutieuse réflexion. En effet, cette séance aussi bien de détente que d'apprentissage, était une bonne transition récréative entre la session de la matinée et celle de l'après-midi. Après le déjeuner les chercheurs pouvaient y passer du temps d'autant plus que les sujets sélectionnés étaient fort intéressants. De plus, les séances d'échange après la projection des films permettaient d'en mieux cerner le contexte, tout en actualisant ses connaissances sur le sujet en question.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to the Centre for African Studies Basel and the Swiss Society for African Studies for hosting ECAS, and especially to all the people involved in organising this conference and making it such a great success.

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The cave of the historic building Schönes Haus on Nadelberg provided a suitable and intimate setting for the film sessions (image: Simon Bielander).



HARD WORK WAS INVESTED IN THE PREPARATIONS FOR ECAS 7

“Welcome to ECAS 7”, I said and smiled at a participant on the first day of the conference as she ascended the steps of Kollegienhaus.

“Thank you! I hope it’s as exciting as it looks online!” came the cheerful reply. She rushed past me into the venue and disappeared into the crowd of hundreds.

Exciting? We certainly wanted to make sure that participants had the best possible experience, but had we overshot it by the movie trailer style introduction to Basel and upbeat updates in the weeks leading up to the event? Time would certainly tell.

To be sure, a great deal of hard work was invested in the preparations for the 7th European Conference on African Studies. Team leaders were interns chosen by the department to lead groups of students divided by self-reported interests and skills; they were given the responsibility of organizing, delegating and completing duties assigned to their groups. Observing them, going about their duties throughout the spring semester was in itself rewarding. The energy, morale and the high level of commitment of the teams were evident at the outset and continued consistently throughout the week of the conference. At the very first planning meeting, the group of leaders was advised to plan wisely but to also be flexible. Perhaps that was the most important bit of advice we received, for just as we suspected, the week of ECAS presented challenges (great and small) which we could not have anticipated, but those for which we were prepared because we had factored in a great deal of flexibility.

Anthony Stewart (ECAS staff) chatting with delegate Sefakor Komabu-Poneyie. The campaign Barrier-free ECAS organized by ZASB graduate Sung Hea Park provided support for delegates with special needs (picture: Simon Bielander).



This is just one occasion of undoubtedly dozens throughout the week of ECAS during which students and staff were flexible, prepared and ready to do their part in making ECAS 7 a successful and memorable conference. In retrospect, I would say that ECAS 7 was most certainly exciting, but it was much more than that. For the students and staff of ECAS 7, it was an amazing opportunity to gain insightful experience in running a major conference, to challenge our own limits and to meet and interact with some of the greatest movers and shakers in the global academic community of African Studies. This once in a lifetime experience was made possible by a great deal of flexibility—and to some degree, a healthy dose of excitement.

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Jacob Geuder, PhD candidate and assistant at the Centre for African Studies Basel instructing the ECAS volunteers (picture Mbaraka Matitu).



ECAS staff during the final preparatory meeting (picture: Mbaraka Matitu).

DIE KONFERENZ BEI MIR ZU HAUSE

Nachdem mich ECAS einige Male in spannende europäische Städte geführt hatte, kam die Konferenz nun sozusagen zu mir nach Hause. Dies ermöglichte es mir nicht nur meine Kollegen und Freundinnen aus dem südlichen Afrika wiederzusehen, sondern ihnen diesmal auch zu zeigen wo ich studierte, arbeite und lebe. Es war aber nicht nur diese persönliche Freude Menschen zu empfangen und zu beherbergen, welche für mich die Gäste aus aller Welt zum Highlight dieser ECAS machte. Viel mehr noch war es erfreulich zu sehen, dass das Organisationsteam der ECAS es schaffte, trotz immer strengeren und rassistischen Visa- und Einreisebestimmungen und oft schwieriger finanzieller Unterstützung, so viele Forschende aus Afrika nach Basel zu bringen.

Insbesondere war es inspirierend, dass auch viele junge und noch nicht etablierte Kolleginnen aus verschiedensten Ländern die Mühe auf sich nahmen, Geld und Bewilligungen aufzutreiben, um sich hier in Basel mit uns auszutauschen. Dieser Aufwand und Bemühungen aller Beteiligten ermöglichte an der ECAS einen akademischen und persönlichen Dialog zwischen verschiedenen Disziplinen, zwischen jüngeren und erfahreneren Forschenden und vor allem auch einen Austausch über Ländergrenzen hinweg. Ein solcher Austausch wird immer schwieriger und scheint politisch von vielen immer weniger gewollt zu sein.

Gerade darum war es aber dieser Austausch, welcher die ECAS für mich zu einem Erfolg machte und welcher hoffentlich auch in Zukunft im Zentrum aller Bemühungen stehen wird, wenn wir uns wieder in Europa treffen um nicht nur über – sondern vor allem mit – Afrika zu diskutieren.

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UNTERSTÜTZUNG FÜR TEILNEHMENDE AUS AFRIKA

Beiträge verschiedener Stiftungen sowie der DEZA erlaubten es, die Reise- und Unterkunftskosten von 50 jungen und etablierten Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler an Institutionen in Afrika zu übernehmen. Rund 70 weiteren Delegierten konnten wir eine Privatunterkunft vermitteln und/oder durch Übernahme der Konferenzgebühren unterstützen. Der Beitrag des Schweizerischen Nationalfonds ermöglichte es, gezielt Vertreterinnen und Vertreter afrikanischer Institutionen und Organisationen einzuladen.

Delegates discussing and chatting during a break. The Kollegienhaus with its garden allowed for a relaxed atmosphere (picture: Kathrin Schulthess).



ECAS ARTS AND CULTURE PROGRAM

The ECAS arts and culture program proved to be a once in a lifetime experience. Beyond the limitations of what sounds like a cliché, the cultural program managed to change my perspective of a city I had interacted with for the past 2 years. I knew Basel like any other international student, but ECAS showed me a city ready and willing to be appropriated. Our visiting artists represented a group of global Citizens eager to interact and own the spaces they entered with their art. In this process I had a privileged spot. I got to see the city I knew transform under the influence of these new voices and at the same time transforming the way I interacted with the city. My role was not limited to logistical planning and operational aspects, as I got to help and actively participate in the making of several performances. From partaking in a wonderful Yoga

session, to helping friends get into Rice bags in the middle of Saturday's Petersplatz flea market to make for a wonderful installation, these performances transformed regular city spaces into living art.

Left: Jazz musicians Siyasanga Charles (East London) and Marcus Wyatt (Johannesburg) accompanying a reading by Henri-Michel Yéré and Fiston Mwanja Mujila on Petersplatz (picture: Mbaraka Matitu).

Below: Yoga sessions were a performance element of the A* piece of street festival curated by Kadiatou Diallo (picture: Kathrin Schulthess).



As I documented every performance, I got to see how the city responded to them. Reactions were varied and included sentiments of excitement, people engaging in open debate and even complete disregard to whatever was happening in their path. Definitely a complete spectrum of reactions. Overall the ECAS cultural experience left me with the curiosity to look at cities like open public spaces ready to be taken. It left me with an interest for engagement that I didn't have before. And most important of all it left me with the location of the best kebab place in Basel.

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Events spread out all over town. Here Itai Hakim (The Brother Moves) performs on Matthäusplatz (picture: Mbaraka Matitu).



OUTLOOK ON ECAS 8 IN EDINBURGH

If, after reading this report on the ECAS conference and on the summer school, you have begun to feel sad because you were not able to attend this year, do not despair! As a matter of fact, the theme for the next ECAS gathering was already announced, in a very festive way, by the future organizing committee from the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh, Scotland. Accompanied by loud bagpipe music, it was presented that the theme will be Connections & Disruptions. So, don't forget to block 12–14 June 2019 in your schedule and join us for ECAS 8 in Edinburgh!

Barbara Bompani, Director of the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh introduces ECAS 8 (picture: Simon Bielander).

