

## FRONTIERS AND PASSAGES CONFERENCE

14 – 17 MAY 2008

### FREIBURG-GERMANY AND BASEL-SWITZERLAND

#### A REPORT

This first time conference was jointly organized by the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD e.V.) and the Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS/SSEA). The meeting had three keynote addresses, four forums and 26 panels. Some meetings were held in Freiburg while others were held in Basel. A total of 394 international speakers made presentations in the course of the week. Three keynote speakers were drawn from Uganda, the U. K. and la Cote d' Ivoire.

In their opening address Heribert Weiland of Arnold-Besrgstraesser-Institut and Till Forster of Centre for African Studies in Basel said, “Both actual and perceived frontiers are losing their significance. Peace and security, economic development or environmental protection can no longer be maintained within the narrow framework of nation states. The challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will only be met by cooperating with our neighbours and overcoming frontiers. However, the awareness for our global connectedness and the international cooperation do not imply that frontiers do not matter anymore. They still mark the line between rich and poor. For millions of Africans who desire to enter Europe the Mediterranean Sea constitutes not only a frontier but a gateway to a better life. These frontiers do not exist for the rich whose wealth is in many cases generated at the expense of Africans. We are implicated in the fact that 2/5<sup>th</sup> of African private assets are kept in bank accounts outside the continent and often in Switzerland.

Many African countries are in a state of transition but it is not clear what the outcome will be. In the same way the established views in the debate on the African continent no longer hold. The conception that liberalization and globalization would initiate development was as naïve as the belief that African economies had to be shielded from the harsh climate of the world economy. African studies have become increasingly aware that they can hardly claim persistence for their analyses and comments. They too are in a state of transition.

The Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg and the University of Basel practice a strong and lasting partnership within the EUCOR-network. Each of them has a centre involved in African Studies – the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute and the Centre for African Studies Basel. Together they have organized the conference *Frontiers and Passages* concerned with the ecologic, political, social and cultural significance of frontiers and passages. This leaves crossing of boundaries in a novelty. We expect it to portray a region that has not only learned to live with borders but to make them productive.”

The African Publishers Network (APNET) was represented in the forum which was guided by the following background, [Processes of cultural exchange and negotiation depend on forms of communication that are currently experiencing fast-paced changes. The significance of the classical media for the transfer of information — books and the centuries-old traditions of text production — is either diminishing and/or shifting with the ascendancy of electronic media. The World Wide Web with its apparently infinite supply of information is displacing the library; the PDF file is supplanting the printed journal. The extent and consequences of these changes are still far from predictable. On the one hand, disrespecting borders, the internet promises a free flow of communication and the participation in a globalized knowledge society. On the other hand, taking a truly global perspective, formative patterns are beginning to emerge which, once again, threaten to assign to the African continent the role of loser.

It is against this background that this panel is devoted to the digital revolution and its consequences for the African continent. Four presentations discuss general topics and particular issues against different professional backgrounds and engagements in Africa and outside of it. Particular issues refer to digitisation and publishing in Africa, digitisation, research and university libraries in Africa and digitisation, archives and cooperation projects. ]

The audience was invited to participate in the discussion.

Presenters on this panel included:

1. Peter Limb (Michigan State University): Digital Partnerships for African Studies: A State-of-the-Art Report
2. Ellen Ndeshi Namhila (University of Namibia): Libraries, Publishers and the Production of Knowledge about Africa: The Perspective of a University Librarian
3. Premesh Lalu (University of the Western Cape): Who's Afraid of Digitization? Postcoloniality and the Specters of Technology in (Southern) Africa
4. Tainie Mundondo (African Publishers Network): Publishing and Digitization in Africa: Perspectives and Experiences from the African Publishers Network

APNET's participation at this conference was of benefit in the following ways:

- a) APNET received the collective benefit of being featured at this conference which focused on development issues. The focus on African publishing as a cultural, business and developmental activity proves that African publishers are a power to reckon with and they cannot be ignored in such critical discussions.
- b) The conference gave APNET the needed exposure at a critical time in its history.
- c) The forum showed that APNET is not forgotten and that it might take a long time to forget all that APNET has done and continues to do for the African publishing community.
- d) APNET is viewed as a lobbying organization for the benefit of its members, hence the need to hear its point of view at this forum.

The handicap of this conference was that participants could not be involved in all the different panels and forums as they were held concurrently. It was possible though to attend four or five panels/forums, when one was not presenting.

It is hoped that when such conferences take place again in future, the African publishing industry will again be a core participant, to ensure that its interests are protected.

**END**