

INTRODUCTION:

AFRICA'S CHANGING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND REALITIES

AFRICAN STUDIES ON THE RISE IN CENTRAL EUROPE
AND THE PÉCS AFRICAN STUDIES CONFERENCE SERIES

ISTVÁN TARRÓSY
UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS

Commemorating the 55th Africa Day (after the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963), the University of Pécs hosted the 5th Pécs African Studies Conference between May 24–26, 2018. Almost 60 scientific papers were presented by scholars representing over 20 countries of the globe. The co-organizers of the event, the Africa Research Centre and the Centre for International Relations embedded the conference into the annual International Spring run by the university, in particular, its closing Africa Week, which was designed with the aim to make citizens become more familiar with African history, cultural heritage, contemporary trends and developments across the continent. The University of Pécs hosts a growing number of students from 18 African countries, and as part of its Internationalization Strategic Programme, the institution pays focussed attention to African partnerships and the recruitment of talented young Africans. At present, it has bilateral cooperation agreements (also within the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility scheme of the European Union) with universities in Ethiopia, South Africa, Morocco, Botswana and Kenya. The Africa Research Centre furthermore fosters collaboration with universities in Tanzania, Rwanda and The Gambia. The Centre hosts the biannual international conference of the country, as well as publishes the Hungarian Journal of African Studies (in Hungarian: Afrika Tanulmányok). In addition, it has been running ongoing field research projects mainly in the member states of the East African Community (EAC) and Ethiopia.

The fifth conference had 15 panels under the title “Africa’s Changing International Relations and Realities”. The Africa Research Centre invited many of its partners to act as co-hosts, thus, the Metropolitan State University of Denver (USA), the Polish African Studies Centre at the University of Wrocław, together with the Jagellonian

Research Centre for African Studies in Cracow (PL), the Centre of African Studies at the University of West Bohemia (CZ) and the Center for West African Studies of UESTC, Chengdu (PRC) joining forces all contributed to the interdisciplinary conference.

The keynote address was delivered by Lawalley Cole – a Gambian scholar having worked decades in many African and international organizations, currently based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at the African Union Commission Headquarters –, who gave an overview of the much-needed capacities of African countries for efficient economic and social development.

In close collaboration with the Department of African Affairs of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the conference accommodated a first-time-ever symposium of the Visegrad Four countries with two round-tables centred around the Africa Policies as well as African Studies education and research activities of the four Central and Eastern European countries. Heads of department and other diplomats of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia all presented their countries' engagements across the African continent in detail. In the academic field all university representatives confirmed that for some years there has been a rise both in terms of collaborative efforts within the region, and as far as research and education projects are concerned. Contemporary researchers, first of all, can relate back to the first Africanists of these countries of the 19th and 20th centuries, but most importantly, can become active participants of the vibrant global community of African Studies with their niche research projects and results.

When the Pécs African Studies conference series was initiated in 2010 as part of the European Capital of Culture year of the City of Pécs (the first Hungarian city with this prestigious title), a memorial lecture was also launched paying tribute to Géza Füssi Nagy (1946–2008), a Bantu philologist, author of the first Hungarian–Swahili grammar book and dictionary, who truly was one of the decisive figures of the revival of Hungarian African Studies in the second half of the 20th century. In 2018, one of his former students, a leading Anthropologist today, Tamás Régi delivered a lecture entitled “The Problem of Symbols: Language and Tradition in Africa”.

The two-day conference also embraced several cultural programmes, including a Senegalese African drum and dance show and an African music night. Undoubtedly, the event has become one of the leading scientific events of African Studies in Central and Eastern Europe. With the publication of this English-language Special Issue of the Hungarian Journal of African Studies a selection of the conference papers will also be important for further academic developments and collaborations – thanks to the generous support of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the rotating Presidency of the Visegrad Four Countries.

As a direct continuation of the 2016 international conference, which addressed the central topic: “*Emerging Africa – Old Friends, New Partnerships and Perspectives for the 21st Century*”, analyzing the role and opportunities of Africa from the perspective of old colonial relations and emerging economies in our transnational global world, which is becoming increasingly multipolar in the course of the 21st

century, the 5th event in 2018 focused on discussing Africa's potential place and role in international politics and the interconnected global economy, as much as how the enhanced dynamics of external actor engagements affect daily realities across the continent. It offered the ground to present both macro and micro perspectives and to analyze the various interactions among different entities and stakeholders. One of the key questions put forward was: how a confident 'African agency' can determine the most desirable path of development for Africans and what types of partnership African peoples want for their own future.

After a successful national conference on African studies in 2007, and the first international event in the year of 2010 when Pécs was a European Capital of Culture, the Africa Research Centre is committed to hold a bi-annual conference for Hungarian and international scholars with the aim to foster regional co-operation in the field of African research, together with gradually integrating into the global community of Africa research.

Many hail that Africa has been "on the rise" in a number of different ways, as the continent and many of its states have a growing weight in the transnational global politico-economic arena of today. According to recent surveys, up until 2030 the African continent will keep a strong annual growth rate of around 5–7%, parallel to which, it will continue stabilizing its political frameworks and processes, therefore, will be able to transmit a new "image", which is inevitable for any long-term investment and development at large. Many others, including Ian Taylor – one of the invited speakers of the Pécs African Studies conferences, too – draw our attention to the numerous critical dimensions of the "Africa rising" mantra.

There is undoubtedly a new wave of dynamism coming from the emerging economies of the semi-peripheries of the international system. In the academic community there has been a recent debate not only about the re-emergence of actors of the Global South – for instance, China, India, Brazil, or Turkey and South Korea –, but also about the return of the political economy of the 1970's. Taylor's *Africa Rising? BRICS – Diversifying Dependency* book from 2014 is a firm scholarly piece to raise awareness not about the new forms of dependency, but rather the extended group of entities that – as external forces – create more dependent linkages for African actors. One of the most important questions starts ticking in our head: has any of the obvious political developments, improvements in governance and high economic growth documented with massive GDP figures resulted in 'real' local development for societies at large? Also, have these emerging powers, especially the BRICS countries, presented an alternative (model) – not only as opposed to the U.S.-dominated neoliberal Washington Consensus, but also amongst themselves, compared with one another – to Africa?

Among the most intriguing issues of current narratives and debates we find the changing African cities, which have a substantial influence on the changing social and physical environment, as well as the transforming dichotomy between urban and rural areas, traditions and human relations; the growing middle class across the continent, which will have the strength to support and/or drive fundamental changes

in their societies in the long run; or the new type of competition among actors with historic ties with Africans, and other, sometimes more dynamic and pragmatic entities of the semi-peripheries of the Global South, such as the members of BRICS.

In light of all these it is time to further discuss the relations of African states with global key actors, the development of regional organisations, the future of the African Union, etc. We need to look into different African states and the challenges they need to understand and meet.

This Special Issue of the Hungarian Journal of African Studies (Afrika Tanulmányok) collects a number of interesting papers, which may help us understand the “changing relations and realities” better. Renowned Africanists publish together with young investigators from 8 countries, including the USA, Ethiopia, The Gambia, South Africa, Turkey, Russia, Poland and Hungary. Their contributions deal with development policies, the changing narrative of foreign aid, creating capacities for efficient economic and social development, the role of education, together with the potential of female political representation in African progress (via the cases of East African states), as well as a number of case studies ranging from securitization issues in the post-1998 Ethiopian–Eritrean bilateral context, currency devaluations, the role of youth in South African politics, the issue of sovereignty in the French–Sub-Saharan bilateral relations’ context, Turkey–South Africa trade relations to the political influence of the Lebanese diaspora in West Africa, the anti-genocide movement in the USA, and social media dynamics as a new political factor in Africa, to language-policy paradigms. A wide array of important topics and fine research, which hopefully will add to more discussions, and even more so, better solutions to African questions.

We will definitely continue contributing to nuanced academic exchanges: the 6th Pécs African Studies Conference will host scholars from all over our regions and beyond in May 2020! See you in Pécs!

