



GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON  
DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES INSTITUT LONDON

## Transcending Boundaries: Biographical Research in Colonial and Postcolonial African History

Workshop at the German Historical Institute London, 7-8 May 2010

Convenors: Silke Strickrodt (GHIL) and Achim von Oppen (University of Bayreuth)

### Call for Papers

Conventional colonial history is interested mainly in the perspectives of the dominant (European) power or its claim to power over (non-European) societies. The delineation of new political, social or epistemological boundaries has always played an important role in this. This was the case for all colonial territories in the ‘global south’, but Africa in particular – due to its supposedly ‘different’ and fluid conditions – served as a laboratory and a projection screen for European boundary-making.

Recent approaches have enriched the debates in the field of colonial history with a number of complementary and differentiating aspects (such as the “capillaries of power” [Foucault] in terms of cultural and everyday history and the history of knowledge, the participation of non-European agents, the phenomenon of post-colonialism and the inconsistency of (post-) colonial legitimisation and practice), though without transcending the paradigm of the ‘colonial power’. In the neighbouring fields of cultural studies and social sciences, an emphasis has meanwhile emerged on the blurring and transcendence of boundaries and on hybridisation, which mainly derives from perspectives ‘from beneath’ (that is of subaltern or colonised groups) and ‘from inside’ (from everyday practice and experiences).

New approaches in historical research offer a synthesis between these threads of debate by relating claims to power to everyday experiences, delineations of boundaries to the transcendence of boundaries, structural constraints to dynamic activity, discourses of hegemony to creative adaptation or re-interpretation, treating these as interaction and dialogue and thus overcoming one-sided perspectives. This also applies to the new interest in the connections and mutual influences between the colonial or postcolonial territories in the south.

Biographical research is especially suited to producing such a dialectic and dialogic treatment of colonial and postcolonial history. Careers and life stories of individuals and generations show particularly clearly the disruptions and constraints that were caused by colonial and postcolonial rule and the boundaries imposed by it. At the same time, life stories show how in everyday life these boundaries became porous or fluid, even producing new mobilities and continuities that transcended them, and how in this field new individual and collective identities were formed. This applies to politico-spatial boundaries of all kinds, which particularly in Africa conflict with deeply rooted mobilities that have always transcended even

the boundaries of the continent in all directions. However, it also applies to borderlines between social and cultural spaces and, not least, to the delineations of historical periods, which in colonial and postcolonial contexts were often given a mythologising absoluteness (pre-colonial/colonial/postcolonial, traditional/modern, etc).

For these reasons, Africa appears to be particularly suited to biographical studies which transcend continental, politico-spatial, social and cultural and epochal boundaries. At the same time, this offers an opportunity to examine a part of the world which so far has been largely neglected by biographical research. Biographical research in Africa is still limited largely to biographies of outstanding politicians from the periods of colonialism and independence and to anthropological biographies of ‘typical’ representatives of particular groups. There are only a few social-historical studies of individuals or cohorts –produced mainly by European authors – and hardly any biographies of women which grant their subjects sufficient individuality.

For this workshop we are looking for empirical case studies dealing with the life stories or careers of individuals or groups. In line with the reflections detailed above, a wide spectrum of potential case studies comes into consideration, including Africans but also Europeans, ‘Asians’ and ‘Americans’ from the mid-nineteenth to the end of the twentieth centuries. Of particular interest are the entanglements and crossings, but also boundaries and disruptions which become visible from a biographical perspective. In this way, we also aim to contribute to a fundamental question of historical biography, asking how far the perspective of the individual can throw new light on larger historical processes.

The workshop, which comprises one and a half days, will take place at the German Historical Institute London on 7th and 8th May 2010. We envisage intensive discussions that will bring together a limited number of historians and other scholars working with historical biographies, both at senior and junior levels. We expect active contributions from the participants, who will come from Germany, the United Kingdom and other European countries, including – and particularly desired – Africans who are based in Europe.

Please submit proposals for papers, including title and abstract (no more than one page), and a short CV to both Achim von Oppen ([Achim.vonOppen@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:Achim.vonOppen@uni-bayreuth.de)) and Silke Strickrodt ([strickrodt@ghil.ac.uk](mailto:strickrodt@ghil.ac.uk)) by 29th January 2010.