



Africa Spectrum

Czernichowski, Konrad / Kopinski, Dominik / Polus, Andrzej (2012),
Polish African Studies at a Crossroads: Past, Present and Future,
in: *Africa Spectrum*, 47, 2-3, 167-185.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg
University Press.

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Polish African Studies at a Crossroads: Past, Present and Future

Konrad Czernichowski, Dominik Kopiński and Andrzej Polus

Abstract: The main objective of this contribution is to examine the developments and challenges of African Studies in Poland, with a special focus on the fields of political science and economics. The article demonstrates that the historical development of Polish African Studies has shaped, but also limited, the ongoing debate concerning its nature and objectives. The paper discusses two competing interpretations of the substance of African Studies and deals with the current challenges and hopes of the Polish academic community studying Africa. It argues that while the field of African Studies usually serves as a common denominator and a type of “area” platform where various scholars doing research on Africa can share their findings, this does not necessarily lead to integration within the community and/or to better communication. Quite paradoxically, the diagnosis of Polish African Studies presented almost 50 years ago by Jan Halpern can still be applied today: “Generally speaking, Polish scholars in African subjects feel that the further progress of their work demands, above all, a better coordination of research and closer contact with specialists abroad.”

■ Manuscript received 4 April 2012; accepted 15 June 2012

Keywords: Poland, African Studies, political science, economics

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Because of Poland's lost independence (1795–1918) and lack of colonies, African Studies developed later in this country than in Western Europe. However, there were some spectacular successes in this field, even while Poland was absent from the maps. Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński, Leopold Janikowski and Klemens Tomczek conducted the first Polish research expedition to Cameroon. Roman Stopa and Bronisław Malinowski were Polish world-class researchers in the interwar period and after World War II. Nevertheless, African Studies in Poland, especially in the fields of political science and economics, are quite different from what can be observed nowadays in Germany, France, the UK or even Sweden. The institutional development and “fashion” of studying African affairs began in the 1960s under the communist regime. Partly as a result of the political transformations of the late 1980s, African Studies suffered from a lack of funding and its practical relevance became questionable.

Since the creation of the field of research known as African Studies, scholars have been debating its very substance. For instance, in Germany in 2003 there was a rather heated debate in *Africa Spectrum*¹ on the role of African linguistics with regard to political science. The theses presented by a political scientist (Engel 2003) were heavily criticised by representatives of ethnology (Bierschenk 2003) and linguistic studies (Reh 2003). This debate closely resembled a debate that took place in the Polish journal *Afryka*.²

The general objective of this paper is to examine the developments and challenges of African Studies in Poland, with a special focus on political science and economics. We will begin with some general remarks regarding the field of African Studies – its history, nature and current state – followed by an attempt to assess the significance of African Studies in Poland within the two respective disciplinary backgrounds represented by the authors – political science and economics.

Academic research with a focus on African affairs in the field of political science is being done at several universities, the most important being the University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski), the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Uniwersytet Warmiński-Mazurski w Olsztynie), the University of Wrocław (Uniwersytet Wrocławski), and the Jagiellonian Uni-

1 At that time and up to Volume 44 (2009) the journal's name was written slightly differently: *Afrika Spectrum*.

2 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 4th European Conference on African Studies in Uppsala, Sweden, in 2011. We are grateful to Susann Baller, Andreas Mehler, Jan Milewski, Eugeniusz Rzewuski, Michał Tymowski, Jerzy Zdanowski and Arkadiusz Zukowski for their valuable comments and suggestions for improving this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

versity in Krakow (Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie).³ Similar to in Germany, in Polish academia African Studies “meets” political science only rarely, and economics even less frequently. This is no different to the situation in French academia, where the principal disciplines represented in African Studies are anthropology and geography (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2006: 107). In fact, there are merely a handful of economists in Poland scattered throughout a number of universities who publish on Africa on a regular basis. Interestingly enough, this small number does not follow historical patterns in Polish academia; rather, it points to a rapid decline which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. The economic research focused on Africa was relatively strong in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to figures such as Egon Vielrose and Zofia Dobrska (see Dobrska 1968), to mention only two. Today, the community of African Studies scholars in Poland is both diversified and scattered. Attempts have been made to change this situation, prime examples being three African Studies congresses, held in 2007, 2010 and 2012, where scholars from various disciplines and sub-fields gathered.

This contribution is divided into four parts: The first presents the historical development of Polish African Studies. The second is devoted to the ongoing debate concerning the nature of African Studies in Poland. The paper subsequently discusses two competing interpretations of the content of African Studies in Poland. The fourth part deals with the current challenges and hopes of the members of the Polish academic community who study Africa. In the analytical sections of the article, the authors examine the narratives of both internal and systemic threats to the development of African Studies in Poland.⁴

African Studies in Poland: A Journey into the Past

Interest on the part of Polish scholars in the African continent can be traced back definitively to the first half of the nineteenth century,⁵ perhaps even

3 Only the University of Warsaw offers the opportunity to study African Studies as a full-scale curriculum. It covers, however, solely the culture and languages of Africa (Swahili, Hausa and Amharic), while the current and past political developments play a secondary role in the educational programme.

4 We have conducted numerous interviews with members of Polish academia but prefer not to quote them. Our analysis also reflects the personal experiences of the authors themselves, who have conducted research in the fields of economics and international relations in sub-Saharan Africa.

5 Some would venture as far as to trace this interest to Polish soldiers fighting under Napoleon in Egypt, the Great Emigration after the November Uprising in 1830, or the modernisation of Egypt. The famous Poles living in the nineteenth century with links to Africa include Paweł Edmund Strzelecki, who explored Africa on behalf of

earlier. Initially, this interest did not translate into academic activity.⁶ The first documented Polish research expedition to Africa took place between 1882 and 1885 and was conducted by Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński, Leopold Janikowski and Klemens Tomczek (Piłaszewicz and Rzewuski 2004: 26).⁷ One of the most eminent scholars of African anthropology at that time was Jan Czekanowski, who studied local societies in the Congo as a member of a German expedition to central Africa.⁸ Czekanowski propagated and developed various statistical methods in anthropology, and published in German, Polish and French (Czekanowski 1924).

After the First World War, Polish academia began to re-establish its foundations. The demand for more expertise on Africa was sparked by, among other things, the formation of the Maritime and Colonial League (Liga Morska i Kolonialna), a rather peculiar, yet very popular venture at that time (with nearly 1 million members in 1939; see discussion below).⁹

Research during the interwar period was dominated by linguistic studies, and the works of Roman Stopa (see Stopa 1960, 1972), a world-class specialist in languages with clicks, are particularly worth mentioning here. The most famous Polish anthropologist – Bronisław Malinowski (whose primary research area was the Trobriand Islands) – visited East Africa in 1934 and conducted field research with his students, formulating the theory of cultural contract (Malinowski 1976).¹⁰ As already mentioned above, between 1918 and 1939 a strong political lobby for overseas possessions and colonies emerged in Poland and was institutionalised in the form of the Maritime and Colonial League. The League's ambition was to educate soci-

the British Crown, and Joseph Conrad (Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski), who based his world-famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, on his experiences during naval voyages to Congo Free State. Non-academic interest in Africa was also sparked by the African expeditions of the Polish Nobel Prize-winner Henryk Sienkiewicz (Egypt, Zanzibar, Bagamojo) at the turn of the nineteenth century, which inspired his novel *W pustyni i w puszczy*.

- 6 An outstanding survey of academic literature devoted to historical links with Africa and the Polish diaspora present on the continent is offered in Żukowski (2006).
- 7 For more information about Polish explorers on the African continent, see Gołabek (1978).
- 8 For detailed information on the Polish contribution to African ethnology, see Kuczyński (1994: 113-159).
- 9 The Maritime and Colonial League was the second-largest mass social organisation (based on membership) in pre-war Poland, after the Air and Chemical Defence League (Liga Obrony Powietrznej i Przeciwgazowej).
- 10 Bronisław Malinowski served as a mentor to Jomo Kenyatta (the first prime minister and president of independent Kenya), and even wrote an introduction to Kenyatta's book (1965: vii-xiii) about his own ethnic group – one of the first books about Africa written by an African.

ety about naval issues and train specialists in the fields of tropical medicine and farming, who would facilitate Polish settlements in the colonies (the League was interested in taking over German, French and Portuguese possessions in Africa) (Szczerbowska-Frańczyk 2002: 67-68). The League perceived colonies as a possible solution to the problem of unemployment and overpopulation in Poland. As a result of the Maritime and Colonial League's pressure and successful lobbying, as well as the Polish government's demands in the League of Nations for overseas territories, colonial studies emerged at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and University of Warsaw (Kuczyński 1994: 144-145). While discussing the interwar period, one also must not overlook archaeological studies carried out by Polish academics in Egypt, which became the foundations of the world-famous discoveries after the Second World War.

In general, African politics and economic systems began to be pursued as separate academic disciplines in Western countries in the 1950s with the emergence of African nationalism. With independence achieved, the analytical scope shifted to the political developments of the newly self-governing states (Smelser and Baltes 2001: 255-256). In Poland, research in these fields began being institutionalised in academia in the 1960s. It should also be taken in the context of the political climate of the postwar era. The Soviets became more active in the Middle East, and later, after Stalin's death, in Africa. The Africa policy of major Warsaw Pact states towards Africa received additional impetus with the advent of decolonisation.

Krakow and Warsaw became the two major academic centres in Poland, and studies related to Africa were conducted almost exclusively there. The University of Warsaw became a major place of development for African Studies. Since the 1950s these had mostly been linguistic studies (focusing on Ethiopian Studies), but the university's scope started to broaden in 1962 with the opening of its Centre of African Studies (Halpern 1965: 430). The Centre was led by Stefan Strelcyn, who was later awarded the prestigious Haile Selassie Prize for his research on Ethiopia. He adopted a new philosophy of institutional development in African Studies. The Centre was an interdisciplinary research unit where scientists from various disciplines could meet with journalists and contract workers from Africa to engage in debates about current developments on the continent. Other prominent Polish researchers of Ethiopia in this era include Zygmunt Frajzyngier, Joanna Mantel-Niećko and Nina Pilszczykowska (Pawlak and Rzewuski 2010: 9-10).

In the 1960s, Polish archaeologists launched a series of interdisciplinary research projects in Africa, the most well known being excavations in Egypt and Nubia led by Kazimierz Michałowski. The Centre was also the birthplace of the renowned local journal, *Africana Bulletin*, published from 1964 to

2011. In the late 1960s, the single department with the largest number of students at the University of Warsaw was the Department of Economics, and some studies of the economic development of various African states were produced (a particularly popular field of research was West Africa – especially Nigeria¹¹ and Ghana). The Department of Philosophy and Sociology organised seminars on nation-building in modern African states, modernisation, and the African concept of socialism (Halpern 1967: 270).

Simultaneously, the M.A. programme in African languages was developed in the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw. The Institute came into being before the Second World War (1932) under the direction of Stanisław Schayer, and since 1950 has experienced gradual growth. Whereas philology has continued to be the core of its scientific activity, the Institute, or at least some of its staff, has gravitated toward other academic domains (e.g. sociology, history, ethnology, political geography). In 2009 the Institute was transformed into the Faculty of Oriental Studies.

In the 1970s, the Centre of African Studies was transformed into the African Institute, which engaged in diverse and wide-ranging research, and employed up to 100 academics. The Institute was a remarkable and unprecedented attempt to study Africa using different analytical and methodological lenses within one institution. Later, its name was changed to the Institute of Developing Countries; research and teaching programmes were initiated that were dedicated to all developing states. It was very active in providing expertise and training, including language courses for diplomats, journalists and experts being sent to Africa (whose departure was conditional on passing the exam). The Institute published extensively (for example, the so-called “green” and “yellow” series) on various issues ranging from economics to tropical agriculture. In the late 1970s, the African division of the Institute began to shrink gradually, and African Studies at the Institute of Regional and Global Studies (the successor of the Institute of Developing Countries) is currently represented by only a handful of academics. Two other institutions which deserve credit for contributing to the development of African Studies in this period are the Polish Institute of International Affairs and the Department of Social and Cultural Affairs of Contemporary Africa (*Pracownia Zagadnień Społecznych i Kulturowych Afryki Współczesnej*), the latter having been established in the Polish Academy of Science in 1962 as an initiative of Józef Chałasiński and later renamed the Centre for Studies on Non-European Countries.

11 Economic, academic, technical and cultural relations between Poland and Nigeria have been intensive since colonial times.

The relative popularity of African Studies in the 1960s and 1970s might be partly explained by the Cold War. In the Cold War era, the creation of research institutes devoted to African and Oriental Studies reflected “the Soviet Union’s sharply increased interest in the Afro-Asian world at the time, as a result of Soviet policymakers’ needs for research in the countries of the contemporary East and Africa” (Naumkin 2004: IX). Moreover, the 1960s and 1970s represented a period when African issues became somewhat fashionable in Poland. Polish universities launched exchange programmes with African universities, and the number of popular TV productions and books about Africa significantly increased (Kuczyński 1994: 151).

This period was also marked by an increase in field research on the continent conducted by Polish scholars. At the beginning of the 1960s, the so-called “Polish School of African History”, developed by Marian Małowist, brought concepts of comparative studies of developed and underdeveloped regions into international discourse on African history (Tymowski 2004: 48-52). These concepts were later adopted by Immanuel Wallerstein in his world-system theory (Wallerstein 2007). Also, a number of Polish economists, founders and members of the so-called “Polish Development School”, had a significant effect on topics related to African Studies in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. The most famous names include Ignacy Sachs and the most-renowned Polish economist, Michał Kalecki (Kalecki and Sachs 1967), whose writings on development economics in Third World countries continue to be widely recognised, not only locally but also abroad (some argue, not without merit, that Kalecki’s writings are even more well known abroad). Some of the most influential economic research was conducted at the Centre of Research on Underdeveloped Economies (Międzyuczelniany Zakład Problemów Krajów Słabo Rozwiniętych), a joint unit of the University of Warsaw and the Main School of Planning and Statistics led by Kalecki. The Centre was shut down in 1968 and reopened (following a reshuffling of the staff and Kalecki’s resignation) under the name Institute for Research of Developing Countries (Instytut Gospodarki Krajów Rozwijających się). Among the other authors whose reputations have survived even until today is Czesław Bobrowski (Bobrowski and Tajerowa 1967), who, aside from his academic activity, served as an advisor to the governments of Algeria and Ghana, among many others.

The following decade was dominated by political turmoil and the strengthening of the communist regime’s power in Poland. In 1981 martial law was introduced and the state was governed by the Military Council for National Salvation, which attempted to curb growing mass protests. In the 1980s, African Studies in Poland, due to an economic and political melt-

down, witnessed a gradual depletion both in terms of allocated resources and the number of scholars and practitioners.

According to a prominent Polish Africanist, African Studies in the communist era was relatively free from indoctrination. In fact, African Studies had a reputation as being an asylum for those who wished to pursue academic research without Marxist constrictions. The level of autonomy was significant, which certainly does not mean that the scholarly work was completely outside of the control of the Polish Communist Party (nothing was – at the end of the day, Poland was run by a totalitarian regime). In principle, there were three categories of writings covering developments in Africa at that time. The first was comprised of pure academic publications, which remained the least-indoctrinated and were rarely immersed in the prevailing ideology. The second type of writings constituted official accounts and press articles, often “ideological to the bone”. Finally, there was the work of Ryszard Kapuściński. His writings (*The Emperor*, for example) show that whereas criticising communist countries in Europe was not permissible at that time, criticising African models of socialism *was* (see Kapuściński 1969). Interestingly, *The Emperor* is considered by many to be a satire on the rule of Edward Gierek, the Communist Party’s first secretary, from 1970 to 1980 (see, for instance, Domosławski 2010: 333-335). Many books published by Africanists in that period were far from laudatory of Marxism – in fact, some even contained ideas that were considered rather heretical. This can at least partly be attributed to the relatively light political weight of Africa for the Polish Communist Party.

In 1989 the political transition officially began in Poland when the Solidarity movement was legalised and the communist government allowed it to participate in a semi-free parliamentary election. The transition period was marked not only by radical economic reforms, political pluralism and strategic reorientations in foreign policy, but also by the necessity for research programmes to adjust to new circumstances. The popularity of Leninism and Marxism in academia ceased abruptly,¹² and one could observe an increased interest in European Studies, as Poland began a bid for membership in the European Union. This and other factors made the 1990s the most challenging period for African Studies to maintain its course and a reasonable level of academic activity.

In recent years, African Studies outside of Warsaw and Krakow has undergone developments. Cyclical Africanist conferences are held by smaller universities, such as the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn and

12 It should be noted that in Poland it has never been particularly strong or pursued by academics with as much zeal as in the Soviet Union or other Soviet-dominated states.

Szczecin University. The effect is multiplied by a growing interest among Polish students. One may even venture to say that Africa has become a “fashionable” research subject, as the number of M.A. theses devoted to Africa is rising every year. The Polish Africanist Society acts as an umbrella organisation for academics who study Africa and represent various disciplines. However, the problem of Polish African Studies is its fragmentation. In simple terms, one can argue that there is one person doing research on Africa in every Polish university, but it is hardly ever his/her major field of interest. Some people pursue African Studies as a second or third research area, and occasionally publish a paper devoted to current developments on the continent.

Debate on the Role of African Studies in Poland

The discussion concerning the achievements and conditions of African Studies in Poland was begun by two Polish Africanists: Joanna Mantel-Niećko (1933–2009) and Rajmund Ohly (1928–2003) in the mid-1990s. This debate is particularly interesting to follow for academics representing the fields of political science and economics, as they often consider themselves sidelined in the Africanist milieu, which today seems to be somewhat rooted in sheer numerical underrepresentation.¹³ One of the most vividly discussed issues raised during the debate was the social usefulness of Africanist scholars’ work. What is the role of African Studies in a country whose ties with the continent – both historical and present – are of negligible importance? What is the motivation to devote one’s academic (and often private) life to the study of the African continent? What are the possible benefits for other scholarly fields? These and similar questions preoccupied the participants the most. In the debate that took place in the official bulletin of the Polish Africanist Society, Niećko formulated three principal roles of African Studies (*Afryka* 1995: 10-13). The first of these, called the cognitive role (or, in simple terms, the “urge to know”), clearly stands out as a chief objective. The outcome of this intellectual pursuit is difficult to establish *a priori*. Nonetheless, the cognitive motive, being the major driving force of African Studies in Poland, particularly in the past, occupies a special place. The other *raison d’être* of African Studies is the raising of awareness and dissemination of knowledge about the continent and its people. This also entails debunking myths and stereotypes that surround Africa in Polish society and heavily distort the image of the continent. The third role is related to self-develop-

13 This is reflected in the very small number of papers by economists and political scientists published in *Afryka*, the official bulletin of the Polish Africanist Society.

ment. Niećko argues that while trying to understand others, we may actually gain a better understanding of ourselves.

What is particularly interesting, yet at the same time may reveal a bitter truth about Polish African Studies (see below), is that the debate has rarely touched upon the practical dimension of the discipline. This is rightly noted by Waliński (*Afryka* 2010: 144), who laments that African Studies in Poland lacks a utilitarian touch, an aspect very pronounced in American Studies, for example. It may be argued that the African Studies community has not recognised or has not been genuinely interested in actively advancing the practical angle of the discipline (the period of the 1960s and 1970s, when African Studies were thriving, is certainly an exception, but it was mostly in response to international events – namely, decolonisation). Waliński argues that scholars must take responsibility for the way African Studies evolves. As long as African Studies is confined to studying languages, culture and anthropology, it is unlikely that the demand for the knowledge and expertise created in this academic field will grow within one's lifetime. On the other hand, referring back to the German discussion already mentioned, Reh notes that African languages are crucial in conducting all kinds of research, including economic research, since 80 per cent of communication in Africa occurs in one of the 2,000 languages of the continent rather than English or French (Reh 2003: 252). Besides, it is academic achievements and number of students, not necessarily utility, that make the development of a given discipline possible.

It may be assumed that the demand for African Studies in Poland is inherently very limited and that interested parties need to push for it to make it take off. This can be accomplished through a concerted effort by the whole community to turn the attention of the Polish political class to the fact that Africa can no longer be solely viewed as an object of charity or a tourist destination. In the eyes of many academics, Africa is both an objective and an object. The growing engagement of “emerging powers” in Africa, such as China and India but also Turkey and Iran, shows that an entirely new process is unfolding. Obviously, efforts made to raise awareness need to be complemented at the societal level.

Milewski notes that the roles of African Studies are not written in stone and their formulation depends on subjective perspectives, therefore implying that the motives pointed out by Niećko are only one possible reading of the role of African Studies in Poland. The first role, according to Milewski, is “satisfying [the] needs of those who wish to take on African Studies”. The second pertains to providing reliable information and knowledge about the current events taking place in Africa. The third role is the most pragmatic: African Studies scholars should play an advisory role in the policy-making process and provide information to non-governmental organisations en-

gaged in Africa. The second and third roles have some obvious overlap and are mutually reinforcing. The view presented by Milewski is probably the most appealing for political scientists and economists who not only are seeking an identity for themselves in the Africanist milieu, but are also eager for their work to have a more practical dimension and some influence on policy formulation.

The Substance of African Studies: The Polish Africanists' View

There are two competing interpretations of the substance of African Studies in Poland. The first, rather narrow reading – attributed to scholars representing linguistic and cultural studies (often called “core” Africanists) – regards African Studies as a fully autonomous field, a discipline in its own right (*Afryka* 2010: 134). It assumes that Africa as a research subject is unique and that its local context requires methodological tools tailored specifically to its non-replicable features. According to the second interpretation, African Studies is similar to European or Asian Studies. There is nothing particularly exceptional about how the research is handled, except for the geographical focus. For Vorbrich, to become an Africanist, one must first be an ethnologist, economist or anthropologist. This is how African Studies have been carried out for years in the vast majority of universities and research institutions in Poland. Milewski argues that due to the formal procedures in Polish academia with regards to obtaining scientific titles (Ph.D. in economics, political science, etc.), the latter definition of African Studies will most likely be more relevant in the future, as it better suits the academic reality.

Using the term “African Studies” (*afrykanistyka*) in a narrow sense – namely, in relation to linguistic studies, which implicitly suggests “being a specialist in Africa” – is challenged by Milewski (*Afryka* 2010: 136-137). He argues that considering the fact that there are over 2,000 African languages, it is difficult to reconcile linguistic specialisation (which is reduced to several languages at the most) with a broader perspective and understanding of Africa as a whole. In the same vein, Tymowski warns against a too-narrow specialisation within African Studies and seems to suggest that using the term *afrykanistyka* should be, at least to some extent, conditional upon the scope of the academic research (*Afryka* 2010: 139). Taking this argument further, one can ask whether it is legitimate to call a scholar with an extremely narrow specialisation (for example, someone who does research on one African ethnic group) an Africanist. It should also be noted that while the field of “African Studies” serves as a common denominator and a type of “area” platform where various scholars doing research on Africa can

share their findings, it does not necessarily lead to integration within the community and better communication. For example, an ethnologist studying Tswana ethnic groups' rituals and an economist investigating central banking in Botswana are as distant from each other as a historian studying the culture of Kaszuby (a geographical region in Poland) and an econometrician working for the Polish central bank. The argument goes further that an Africanist is automatically expected to be an expert on Africa. Jacek Pawlik, for example, laments that being an Africanist exposes him to all sorts of questions that go far beyond his specialisation and leave him puzzled (*Afryka* 1998: 109). This can be compared to expecting a representative of European Studies who is a specialist in the French Revolution to comment on the fall of ancient Rome. Pawlik argues that within each discipline there should be space for Africa. ("What kind of historian is a scholar whose knowledge is confined to ancient Egypt?", *Afryka* 1998: 108).

The narrow vision of the field of African Studies as merely linguistic and cultural studies, and the strong position of cultural and linguistic studies in Polish academia, can be to some extent explained by the historical context. After the Second World War, scholars interested in African Studies were seriously handicapped with regards to funding for their research. Field studies or, more generally, studying African reality, was infinitely more difficult than the usual academic research. In the early days of the communist regime, studying foreign languages, which basically required access to written texts, was considered more feasible for financially starved academics than, for example, studying tropical agriculture. This thesis can be supported by the example of Niećko herself, a specialist in Ethiopian languages, who, as Vorbrich recounts (*Afryka* 2010: 135), made her first trip to Ethiopia only after having obtained a postdoctoral "habilitation". This type of academic path, in which it is possible to be a renowned specialist in a geographical area without actually having visited the place, would be close to impossible in many other disciplines.

A similar interpretation of African Studies also evolved in Germany. African Studies were traditionally defined in Jacob Mabe's *Afrika-Lexikon* as a discipline "dealing with research and description of languages and literature in Africa" (Mabe 2001: 9). However, according to the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD, Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland), this field may also deal with the current problems occurring in Africa alongside their historical conditions (Engel 2003: 112). The field can also be understood as a platform of cooperation between Africanists from different countries (Engel 2003: 112). The voices of African scholars in this discussion need to be taken into account to a greater extent.

Developing African Studies in Poland: Current Challenges (and Hopes)

Those attempting to develop African Studies in Poland into something less “exotic” and working hard to bring Africa’s problems into the heart of academic discourse face numerous challenges. First, the popularisation of Africa has traditionally been fraught with obstacles. The root of the problem may be attributed to the design of the educational system and the way history is taught in schools. Tymowski (*Afryka* 2010: 139) points out that in the nineteenth century pupils were taught that Africa had no history. Even today, in the most commonly used textbooks, Africa appears for the first time (chronologically speaking) in the context of ancient civilisations (Egypt, Rome) and reappears only briefly in the time of the slave trade and colonisation, described only within the context of European activity.¹⁴ The way Africa’s history is taught makes it seem as if the continent did not exist between those two points in time. The problem is systemic and nationwide, going beyond what is conveyed to students in schools. As Tymowski notes, in the recent edition of *Historia Powszechna* (literally *General History*), the history of Africa is almost completely absent. In his opinion, Poland, despite its recent socio-economic development, has significantly regressed in terms of knowledge about Africa and, more regrettably, this can also be observed among intellectual elites. At the secondary level there is a lack of books about Africa in school libraries, especially in small towns.¹⁵ Milewski does not share this view. According to him, a lot of progress has been made in the area of school textbooks. The amount of knowledge about Africa that was introduced after the 1990s is incomparable with that of any other period. Moreover, the development of the Internet has facilitated access to information about the continent (*Afryka* 2003/2004: 83). The popularisation of Africa in Polish society should also be the responsibility of the media (*Afryka* 2010: 142-145). Regrettably, most of the efforts to raise awareness lead to counterproductive results, and Africa ends up being seen as a land of famines, deadly diseases and brutal civil wars. Paradoxically, knowledge of Poland (through the heritage of John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa) has been widely spread in Africa (*Afryka* 1998: 110-111).

Today, as once-legendary names such as Czekanowski and Stopa have begun to fade, the relatively weak position of Polish African Studies in the

14 The concentration on Africa’s history of colonisation and decolonisation may be a result of the Polish experience of being partitioned among Russia, Prussia and Austria in the years 1772–95.

15 According to one anecdote, a Polish book about Africa had a tiger on its cover, an animal that lives exclusively in Asia.

international scholarly community – which can best be measured by the number of publications in well-respected peer-reviewed journals abroad – can be attributed to many factors. One reason can be traced back to the core assumptions of Polish foreign policy in conjunction with the current political and economic relations with African countries. This is particularly important, or even critical, for the fields of political science and economics, given that in these disciplines academic activity is often demand-driven. It is quite evident that the status of Africa or Asia in the foreign policies of many Western countries may strengthen the respective areas of study in those Western countries. The political and economic significance of Africa in Poland has been, admittedly, marginal at least since the 1980s, when the country succumbed to a crisis that led a few years later to a historical turning point and a change in regime. Today, Africa is virtually non-existent in Polish foreign policy.

Poland's accession to the European Union imposed certain obligations on the part of the Polish government to rejuvenate its engagement with the African continent – for example, in the area of development assistance (according to the European Consensus on Development signed by Poland in 2005, 50 per cent of new aid allocations should be earmarked for Africa). Joining the EU also prompted the government to adopt its first strategy documents since the fall of communism covering relations with the continent. Nevertheless, this top-down “encouragement” to adopt a coherent policy towards Africa has not been widely successful. On the contrary, Polish cooperation with Africa has remained at a standstill, despite some signs that the government actually wishes to move things forward. A hint of this goal was demonstrated in a meeting held in the Ministry of Finance in 2008, where tightening cooperation with the African region within a new EU–Africa framework was discussed (*Afryka* 2010: 145). Regrettably, to the authors' knowledge, it has not been furthered in any way, which again proves that policy toward Africa is nothing but an illusion. The lack of Polish contribution to the eight thematic groups adopted under the Joint EU–Africa Strategy in 2007 and the decision to shut down four embassies on the continent in the name of trimming costs in the foreign policy budget can also be seen as quite symptomatic. The latter move has been explained as part of a strategy of setting up a new model of diplomatic outposts reduced to regional hubs. Nevertheless, given the swiftness of the operation and the astonishment of experts, it is difficult to believe that this was indeed part of some kind of master plan.

It is worth noting that Poland enjoyed a positive reputation in many African countries during the Cold War. Many of the Africans who studied in Poland at that time are now among the continent's political elites. The most

well-known are Prof. Alpha Oumar Konaré (former chairman of the African Union and former president of Mali) and Libertine Amathila (former deputy prime minister of Namibia). At this stage, the Polish government could still capitalise on past experience and personal contacts, but this conducive environment will not last forever. African students still come to Poland to study, but this is on a much smaller scale than before. If the government does not act now, cooperation with Africa, if ever resumed, will have to start virtually from scratch.

Balancing out this slightly depressing picture are the more optimistic trends that are starting to emerge in Poland, outside of the official milieu and traditional Africanist strongholds. A gradual increase of interest in Africa in both Polish society and among students is currently taking place. For example, at the Institute of International Studies of the University of Wrocław, where the authors work, the number of master's theses devoted to Africa is rising every year. Another important trend, in this particular case emerging within university walls, is the development and rise of various students' associations working on African affairs.¹⁶ What has also captured Poles' attention in recent years is the AfryKamera African Film Festival organised annually since 2006 in Poland (<www.afrykamera.pl>). AfryKamera is the only film festival exclusively dedicated to African cinema in Central and Eastern Europe. A strong impetus also comes from non-governmental organisations that have been growing recently in Poland. Many of them have been raising awareness about Africa's problems, lobbying for Africa in government circles, and attempting to garner a more adequate amount of attention for the continent in the media.

In 2010 a group of academics from the University of Wrocław established the Polish Centre for African Studies (PCSA – <www.pcsa.org.pl>). The Centre is the first independent, non-governmental organisation in Poland and Central Europe devoted exclusively to the study of contemporary Africa. The main goal of the Centre is to carry out rigorous academic research and produce relevant policy analysis with regards to Africa, mostly in the fields of economics, international relations and political science. In producing such an analysis, the PCSA aims to contribute to the revitalisation and deepening of economic and political relations between Central Europe and Africa. One of the core ideas that prompted the set-up of the PCSA was

16 One of the most active student associations is the Society for African Affairs at the Jagiellonian University. Since 2007, the Society for African Affairs has organised the African Festival in Krakow, an educational and cultural event, see <www.festiwalafrykanski.com>. In 2004 the interdepartmental African Society was set up by students at the University of Warsaw, see <www.mkauw.ovh.org>. Students at the University of Wrocław are in the process of creating an African Association.

to enhance the integration and cooperation of Polish academics representing the field of African Studies. Among many other objectives, the Centre is planning to build a database of Polish academics who work in the field.

Conclusion

When Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo visited Warsaw in 2001, he directed his words to Polish specialists who had worked in his country previously: “What are you doing here? You belong to Nigeria. Your job and the people you worked with are waiting for you. Nigeria needs your knowledge and engagement. You left your best memories in our country.” Though this may have been an encouragement for those addressed to come back for Nigeria’s benefit, it may also have reminded them that their situation in Poland remains marginal.

Quite paradoxically, the diagnosis of Polish African Studies presented almost 50 years ago by Jan Halpern can still be applied today: “Generally speaking, Polish scholars in African subjects feel that the further progress of their work demands, above all, a better coordination of research and closer contact with specialists abroad” (Halpern 1965: 432). This view is shared by Nina Pawlak, who argues that there is a great need to integrate Africanists who carry out research in various areas. In fact, the desire to integrate African Studies and establish a coherent method for creating projects is the holy grail of Polish Africanists. There are at least two forms of such integration: the creation of African Studies as a universal field of study, and the creation of interdisciplinary research teams. A small number of African Studies centres in Poland (the most important being in Krakow, Olsztyn, Warsaw and Wrocław) should facilitate this integration.

The integration role so far has mostly been filled by the Polish Africanist Society, which has been publishing the peer-reviewed journal *Afryka* since 1994 (twice a year) and has organised various events devoted to Africa. Nevertheless, since the Society rarely engages in activity that could facilitate research-based integration with other disciplines (for example, interdisciplinary collaboration in research projects, joint field studies), alternative venues for channelling the growing interest in Africa must be explored and put to work. The initiative of organising African Studies congresses, which is the Polish Africanist Society’s main project, may be a step in the right direction, but whereas these types of events offer fertile ground for some rudimentary forms of interdisciplinary discourse, they very rarely lead to interdisciplinary research.

Finally, what makes African Studies in Poland different compared to in other European countries is the lack of pragmatic and utilitarian use of stud-

ying the continent. As cited above, Joanna Mantel-Niećko has enumerated only three roles of African Studies: a cognitive role, the raising of awareness, and self-development. It is rarely argued that doing research on Africa can be instrumental in nurturing commercial and political relations with the continent, very practical dimensions. African Studies in many Western countries is often driven by market and job opportunities, not compassion, self-development or even the aforementioned “urge to know”. This mentality shift may also need to occur in Poland and such a shift would be welcomed by political studies and economics scholars. Clearly, this could and should be facilitated by Polish policymakers, who over the years have demonstrated remarkable persistence in looking at the continent through obsolete lenses.

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Die polnische Afrikaforschung am Scheideweg: Gestern, heute und morgen

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag widmet sich der Entwicklung der Afrikaforschung in Polen und den Herausforderungen, vor denen sie steht, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Politik- und Wirtschaftswissenschaft. Die Autoren legen dar, dass die derzeitige Debatte in Polen zu Gegenstand und Zielen der Afrikaforschung durch die historische Entwicklung dieses Forschungsgebiets im Land geprägt und begrenzt ist. Sie stellen die beiden konkurrierenden Interpretationen zum Gegenstandsbereich der Afrikaforschung vor sowie die aktuellen Herausforderungen und Hoffnungen der polnischen Afrikawissenschaftler. Sie argumentieren, die Afrikaforschung diene zwar als gemeinsamer Nenner und regionenbezogene Plattform zum Austausch von Forschungsergebnissen, dies führe aber nicht notwendigerweise zur Integration innerhalb der Forscher-*Community* und/oder zu verbesserter Kommunikation. Paradoxerweise gelte die Diagnose zum Zustand der polnischen Afrikaforschung, die Jan Halpern vor 50 Jahren formulierte, auch heute noch: Polnische Afrikawissenschaftler gingen im Allgemeinen davon aus, dass weitere Fortschritte ihrer Arbeit vor allem von der besseren Koordination ihrer Forschungen und von engerem Kontakt zu Spezialisten im Ausland abhingen.

Schlagwörter: Polen, Afrikanistik/Afrikaforschung, Politische Wissenschaft, Wirtschaftswissenschaft