



Africa Spectrum

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50 Years of *Africa Spectrum*

Andreas Eckert

Abstract: This article offers a portrait of the journal *Africa Spectrum* (known through 2008 as *Afrika Spectrum*), which just celebrated its 50th birthday. The essay outlines both the political and institutional context of its founding and traces its major transformations in format and content. *Africa Spectrum's* metamorphosis also reflects significant changes and trends in African studies in Germany and beyond. One of the journal's main features has been its strong interdisciplinary character and its geographically wide coverage. Over the last decade, *Africa Spectrum* has successfully transformed itself from a mainly German enterprise into a highly visible international journal.

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Keywords: Germany, Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1990), African studies, journals (periodicals)

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When *Afrika Spectrum*, as it was then known, was launched in 1966, African studies was booming in many parts of the world. The boom was in turn part of the fast-growing institutionalisation of area studies as an academic field, with the United States leading the way. The independence of most former African colonies around 1960 made the African continent a politically crucial and intellectually exciting “area” of study, while in Africa itself, new universities and research centres were created – in many cases, these institutions developed out of previously colonial establishments. Among the humanities and social sciences, the academic discipline of history ranked high, as it was regarded as crucial for the task of nation-building (Eckert 2000, 2001). Academic journals became an important signifier for the new interest in Africa. While some Africanist journals – such as *African Affairs*, *Africa*, and the *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* (now called the *Journal des Africanistes*) – had been founded before World War II, and had, sometimes gradually, altered their format and content to try to appear less colonial during the 1960s, that decade also saw a wave of new launches, some more interdisciplinary in focus, some more closely linked to a discipline. The *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, and the *Journal of African History* come to mind. Moreover, at least during the 1960s and 1970s, some journals based in Africa enjoyed a high academic reputation and attracted submissions from both inside and outside the continent – for example, the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*.

In both West and East Germany, some efforts to institutionalise area studies took place during the two decades after World War II, although at a much lower level than in the United States, England, and France. During the 1950s, the Federal Republic of Germany developed a growing economic interest in Africa. Economic considerations as well as the Cold War (and, more specifically, the competition between the two German states) played an important role in the emergence of the West German system of development aid, and this in turn created a growing demand for Africa-specific knowledge.¹ The involvement of various branches of colonial and overseas studies in huge Nazi research programmes (often focused on Africa) had done considerable damage to the reputation of such large-scale, interdisciplinary projects. For a while thereafter, interdisciplinary research centres with a focus on specific areas and related curricula were discredited. Eventually, a number of centres for area studies came into existence.

1 See, among others, Van Laak 2010, Engel 2000, and Bohnet 2015.

Founding, Contents, Main Features

In West Germany, Hamburg (re-)emerged as one of the few significant nodes or centres of African studies.² One major institutional step was the founding in 1963 of the Deutsches Institut für Afrika-Forschung (DIAF),³ which was launched and run primarily by members of an association of Hamburg merchants involved in trade with Africa, the Afrika-Verein, in cooperation with scholars from the University of Hamburg. A key player in this and related efforts to organise African studies in Hamburg and beyond was Günter Jantzen, a historian by training, for many years chief executive of the Afrika-Verein, later counsel to the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce, but also an important mentor for Hamburg-based younger historians of Africa and colonialism. In 1963 the Senate of the city of Hamburg also created the Deutsches Übersee-Institut (German Overseas Institute) as an integrative “umbrella organisation” of pre-existing area institutes: Institut für Asienkunde, Deutsches Orient-Institut, Institut für Iberoamerika-Kunde (Institute of Asian Affairs, German Orient Institute, Institute for Ibero-American Studies). The DIAF profited in its early years from this new framework, eventually becoming a member institute itself under the name Institute of African Affairs.

Three years after its inception, the DIAF launched its own journal, *Afrika Spectrum*, with Martin Krämer, chief executive of the Afrika-Verein, as the editor-in-chief. One early editorial stated, “*Afrika Spectrum* is a scientific journal for research on Africa relevant to present times.” It further emphasised the need for “as much practical relevance as possible” and declared its main purpose was to “convey insights and information about the various problems of the development of African countries and to offer interdisciplinary research contributions.” The strong influence of the Hamburg business community within the DIAF partly explains a certain dominance of economic and geographic topics during the initial years of *Afrika Spectrum*. Among the topical issues of that period, one finds, for example, “UNCTAD, Monetary Policy and Africa” (2/1967), “The Sahara” (3/1967), and “Association of African States to the European Communities” (3/1968). This focus changed over the years, but at least until the late 1970s, the interests of business-

2 For details, see Brahm 2010: 219ff. From the perspectives of certain participants in the institutionalisation of African studies in Hamburg, see Krämer et al. 1969. An informative account of the development of African studies in Hamburg is offered by Cressent 1997.

3 The institute soon came to be known as the Institut für Afrika-Kunde (IAK; Institute of African Affairs).

people were still reflected in some topical issues, such as “Investment Incentives and Investment Climate” (1/1974), and in some specific columns, such as the obituary in issue 1/1977 for Hamburg merchant Klaus Hansen. Another characteristic of the earlier years was a kind of service function for the wider community, manifested, for instance, in the form of statistical reports about courses with a focus on Africa at German universities (Heinze 1972). The most long-standing – and in some ways most peculiar – service column of the journal, maintained by the Maghreb specialist Günter Wiedensohler, was entitled “From African Law Gazettes.” In legal studies, Africa, even today, mostly leads a shadow existence, though issues of law play a very important role in many African studies disciplines such as anthropology, history, and political science. *Afrika Spectrum* could have pioneered an effort to bring Africa more systematically into legal studies, but in this case it amounted only to the listing of legislative regulations from all over the continent.

During its initial years, *Afrika Spectrum* more or less exclusively published contributions in German. Starting in the early 1970s, the journal began to include more articles in English and also some in French, while authors overwhelmingly remained German. While the interdisciplinary orientation continued to be one of its main features, during the 1970s and 1980s topics in the realm of politics and development were clearly dominant (though not necessarily presented by political scientists), while history and social anthropology were represented only occasionally, and linguistics hardly at all.⁴ Bitter controversies about the possibilities and limits of interdisciplinary Africanist research and the political relevance of some disciplines characterised the initial years of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD), founded in 1969, and led to or reinforced a schism between more philology-based approaches and more social sciences-based research (Brahm 2009).⁵ *Afrika Spectrum* definitely represented the latter approach.

Time did not heal all wounds, and some of the old controversies re-emerged in an only slightly new livery in the early 2000s, when political

4 The more classic philological approach to African studies was represented in another Hamburg-based journal, *Afrika und Übersee*. This journal was founded in 1910. The website of its publishing house (Dietrich Reimer, Berlin) states that the last issue (Volume 91/2010) was published in June 2012. Volume 92/2011 is not yet available (<www.reimer-mann-verlag.de>, 11 January 2016).

5 The stronger politicisation of African studies around 1970 was also a result of the growing importance of solidarity movements and support for liberation movements in West Germany (mainly related to Southern Africa); see Kößler and Melber 2006.

scientist Ulf Engel published a provocative article in *Afrika Spectrum* on the state and future of African studies in Germany (Engel 2003). Engel's reflections about a certain provincialism and intellectual self-sufficiency of some Africanist disciplines caused harsh reactions from, among others, a linguist (Mechthild Reh) and a social anthropologist (Thomas Bierschenk).⁶ Polemics aside, this debate on the pages of *Afrika Spectrum* offered interesting insights into conflicting perspectives about interdisciplinary research on Africa, one of the central goals of the journal, and also contributed to broader debates about the state of area studies in Germany after 9/11.

Scanning the contents of the journal between the 1970s and early 2000s, it is difficult to mark clear trends or core themes. On a very general level, one might say that the journal has duly reflected both the zeitgeist of African studies (at least in Germany), in addition to German scholars' broader political interests about Africa, with a strong emphasis on politics and development in the 1970s and 1980s, and an increasing presence of other disciplines and their approaches – notably anthropology, but also history and cultural studies – since then. In terms of positions at German universities, philology and anthropology (at least for most of the period of the journal's life) represented the strongest disciplines with an Africa focus, but contributions from only the latter eventually began to appear in the journal. An internal evaluation of the content profile of the journal's issues from 1993 through 1998 shows that during this period roughly 40 per cent of the articles focused on politics and development, and a further 20 per cent on economy. The remaining 40 per cent covered society, law, history, culture, and literature. The topical issues were more likely to tackle subject matter beyond politics and development.⁷ The 1990s also saw the increasing disentanglement between university Africanists and "practitioners." The latter attended VAD meetings less and less frequently, and for the *Afrika Spectrum*, the need for research to be "practically relevant" became less and less emphasised.

Afrika Spectrum quite early on took up crucial issues in African studies long before they became mainstream, such as the restitution of African cultural possessions and the political significance of Islam south of the Sahara (Zwernemann 1977; Abun-Nasr 1982). Particularly since the late 1990s, Islam has featured quite prominently in the journal.⁸ Especially in the 1990s, the journal regularly addressed current political and academic

6 See Reh 2003; Bierschenk 2003; Lölke and Simo 2004.

7 See internal discussion paper "Profil des *afrika spectrum*," no author, n.d. (c. 1999). Thanks to Andreas Mehler for providing a copy of this document.

8 Loimeier 1997 is just one further example.

debates in innovative ways and in a number of thematic fields. This applies to issues focusing on aid towards democracy (1/1996), endogenous aspects of African legal systems (3/1997), and HIV (1/2001). Issue 1/1998, “Tradition and Modernity in Africa,” dealt with one of the most hotly debated topics of African studies at the time, but to an extent failed to fully portray the many facets of this complex theme. The journal also reacted, albeit with some delay, to current political events such as the execution of the Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro Wiwa (McIntyre 1996), and offered informative analyses on recent elections (Jockers and Rohde 2001). Finally, *Afrika Spectrum* regularly highlighted neglected topics, such as stock exchanges in Africa (Bittner 1998). In geographical terms, the journal included North Africa well into the 1980s, but gradually came to concentrate on sub-Saharan Africa. Otherwise, its geographical coverage was rather widespread. In the period between 1993 and 1998, 41 per cent of the articles dealt with West Africa, 27 per cent with Southern Africa, 23 per cent with East Africa, and 9 per cent with Central Africa.⁹ From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Tanzania enjoyed particular attention, second only to the focus given to South Africa.¹⁰ Earlier articles on Tanzania mainly (and critically) addressed different aspects of *ujamaa* politics (Kürschner 1975; Hofmeier 1981), while later contributions discussed a wide array of topics (see, for example, Weigang 1996; Dilger 2000; Danielson 2000).

Between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s, African studies experienced complex transformations at a global level. In Africa itself, academic knowledge production suffered – exceptions confirmed that rule – from severe decline due to political and economic crises. Only very few scholars based in Africa managed to publish in international Africanist journals, and *Afrika Spectrum* was no exception. During this period, the United States became by far the most important market for African studies and also the new home to many African scholars. English increasingly dominated Africanist publishing, while studies written in other languages were more and more often ignored. However, one of the most innovative new journals in the field was launched in France and in French: *Politique Africaine*, under the dynamic guidance of Jean-François Bayart, set the tone in a number of debates – “politics from below,” for just one example – and strongly emphasised the crucial role of history and anthropology for political science. The approaches launched in this journal met with only little response in

9 See “Profil des *afrika spectrum*.”

10 In the late 1960s, Tanzania began to attract special attention from Africanists all over the Western world, including Germany, because of that country’s charismatic president, Julius Nyerere, and his efforts to establish an “African socialism” there; see Ansprenger 1980: 6–10.

Afrika Spectrum. In Germany, within political science, Africa as well as other world regions beyond the North Atlantic realm became even more marginalised; thus, the impact of the journal on debates in German political science circles was modest at best. Some political scientists, such as the late Gero Erdmann, made a virtue of necessity. In his attempt to disprove Africa's alleged exceptionalism, Erdmann systematically adapted (and at the same time nuanced) "mainstream" political science approaches to African cases in, for instance, the field of research on political parties. In the long run, this also began to affect the "mainstream."¹¹

Winds of Change

In the late 1990s, *Afrika Spectrum* occupied a solid place within the German Africanist community but its international reputation and recognition had remained fairly limited. Around 2000, a profound effort started under the journal's editor-in-chief at the time, the sociologist Dirk Kohnert (who was in charge of the journal from 1991 to 2008), to make the journal more visible internationally. The introduction of peer reviews, the establishment of an editorial team representing various disciplines, and the putting together of an international advisory board all signalled the more ambitious agenda. In 2006 Kohnert succeeded in getting *Afrika Spectrum* accepted into the Social Sciences Citation Index. A number of international big shots published in the journal, some of them representing disciplines hitherto little represented, such as history and social anthropology (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Lonsdale 2005). All in all, the journal, since 2008 with Andreas Mehler and Henning Melber as its editors-in-chief, has increasingly managed to represent a more balanced mix of different generations of scholars from many parts of the world, and a more nuanced mix of disciplines, with political science only one among numerous fields. The successful internationalisation of the advisory board helped to recruit excellent authors. The number of contributors based in Africa eventually rose to 20 per cent. The range of themes is now broader and includes topics from NGO peace-building in Liberia (2/2010) to drug trafficking in Kenya (3/2015) to multilingualism and hip hop in Nigeria (1/2012). A crucial – though controversial – step took place in 2009, when the journal started to publish exclusively in English and turned fully open access. Particularly Africa-based scholars very much appreciate the open access format as an important step towards reducing global asymmetries of knowledge.

11 See Erdmann 1999, 2002; Kneuer et al. 2015.

While many Africanist journals are published by major publishing houses (such as Oxford and Cambridge University Press), *Africa Spectrum* (as the journal has been known since the language turn) continues to be published within the framework of the Institute of African Affairs at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). The journal's link with the German African Studies Association provides an important additional institutional backup. Still, it is rather remarkable that *Africa Spectrum* has recently managed to successfully compete with well-established international journals with similar profiles that are backed by large publishing houses, such as *African Affairs* and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*. While nearly all other German academic journals with an exclusive focus on Africa – for example, *Internationales Afrikaforum* and *Afrika und Übersee* – have died or seem to be moribund, *Africa Spectrum* not only successfully renewed itself but has developed into one of the most important journals in the field of African studies. This field is becoming increasingly complicated for interdisciplinary “area” journals like *Africa Spectrum*, as many respected scholars seem to opt for publishing either in mainstream journals within their discipline or in more discipline-bound journals within African studies. Thus, the consistently high quality of contributions to *Africa Spectrum* over the last years is all the more impressive.

We are now living in times of impact factors and indexes, whether we like it or not. We tend to like it more when our institutions or scholarly products are top-ranked. *Africa Spectrum* recently made it to the higher ranks of Thomson Reuters' Journal Citation Reports both in the area studies category and among African studies journals. At the very least, this is indicative of the journal's successful transformation of itself from a mainly German enterprise to a highly visible international journal. More broadly, it reflects the increasing importance and visibility of Germany as a site of African studies, while at the same time, the study of Africa is more than ever a truly global enterprise. *Africa Spectrum* offers a very important and impressive contribution to the critical analysis and interpretation of Africa's recent past as well as its present.

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50 Jahre *Africa Spectrum*

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Beitrag wird ein Porträt der Zeitschrift *Africa Spectrum* (bis einschließlich 2008 *Afrika Spectrum*) gezeichnet, die gerade ihren 50. Jahrgang gefeiert hat. Der Autor beschreibt den politischen und institutionellen Kontext der Gründungsphase und verfolgt die wichtigsten Veränderungen in Inhalt und Format. Der Wandel der Zeitschrift reflektiert Entwicklungen und Trends der Afrikaforschung in Deutschland und darüber hinaus. Ein durchgehendes Charakteristikum der Zeitschrift war ihr interdisziplinärer Ansatz und die große geographische Reichweite der Beiträge. Im letzten Jahrzehnt konnte sich *Africa Spectrum* erfolgreich von einem vor allem die deutsche Forschung reflektierenden Periodikum in eine global sichtbare und wahrgenommene internationale Zeitschrift für Afrikastudien entwickeln.

Schlagwörter: Deutschland, Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1949-1990), Afrikanistik/Afrikaforschung, Zeitschrift