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Decolonizing the Study of Africa-Related Religions

Reflections on Translocality and Positionality Using the Example of Liberia

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Abstract

This article examines the ongoing process of decolonizing the study of Africa-related religions, which has been shaped by the Anglicizing civilizing mission in sub-Saharan Africa and the current state of English-language academic research. It highlights the importance of understanding researchers' positionality and the power asymmetries involved in the negotiation of Africa, religion, and education. The first part of the article presents a historical example from Liberia around 1900, illustrating the role of agency and language in the institutionalization of religious studies. The second part emphasizes the significance of translocal entanglements and the differentiation of positionalities for academic collaboration. The article argues that the Christian-European civilizing project continues to influence the field, making the decolonization project and efforts to localize knowledge production about Africa an ongoing and unfinished task. Finally, it offers three theses to inspire future research and discussions on Africa, religion, and coloniality.

Key words

Translocality; positionality; decolonization; the study of Africa-related religions

'As form and figure, act and relation, colonization was in many regards a coproduction of colonizers and colonized. Together, but from different positions, they forged a past. But having a past in common does not necessarily mean sharing it.'
(Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, 2021, 4)

Introduction

Achille Mbembe formulated the first version of these sentences in the French language of the former colonizers and thus for the francophone world as the addressee: 'Ensemble, mais à des positions différentes …' (Mbembe 2013, 3). Following up on his observation, this article explores the differentiations, entanglements and interconnections of positions, both during the occupation of African contexts by European powers and the US-American collaborators and in

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the present, with particular reference to the study of religion and its institutionalization in the African university.

Throughout the article, *positionality, translocality*, and *decolonization* are used as three key concepts. Positionality implies the assumption that socialization, personal values, views, location in time and space influence how people create sense, meaning, and their worlds. In this context, gender, race, class, and other aspects such as age, height, or income are indicators of social and spatial positions negotiated multivalently and dynamically, and co-determine a person's perspective. Translocality refers to actors, networks, and social, political, and economic entanglements in which actions such as the establishment of educational institutions are implemented. Decolonization involves a complex process of abolition of power inequalities and the restructuring of power relations. Furthermore, the derived concept of decoloniality differs from the concepts of coloniality, postcoloniality, and transcoloniality, and is at the same time interrelated with them. All debates on these related concepts deal with the question of how *Africa* can be described, historicized, (re-)thought, and (re-)positioned.

When (US-)Europeans pursued their hegemonic interests through expeditions, conquests, commercial trade, cultivation, and civilization missions, the undertakings on the continent were based on their images of *Africa*, or rather on their conceptualization of a *Europe* relational to an *Africa*. In establishing new transcontinental education systems and capitalist trade routes, the colonizing powers exploited local actors and/or partly cooperated strategically with local actors on the continent in very different ways (see Gmayi's view in Noffke 2022). Apart from that, there existed numerous stories of people who had little or no contact with colonial influences for a considerable time. A *project dedicated to decolonizing the study of Africa-related religions* also has to reflect the fact that countless stories will remain untold in the context of academic research.

Although various debates are associated with the term *decolonization*, most of them link the concept to liberation struggles and resistance against unjust appropriation and oppressive forms of domination with totalitarian claims to people, their health, land, and knowledge production. Realizing and enabling different presents and futures present the leading interest here.

With regard to the 'decolonization of African history', the Nigerian-US historian Toyin Falola speaks of three phases: 'the first was resistance to the imposition of colonialism (1880 to 1914) in the form of armed resistance; the second, starting in the 1950s, combined intellectual and armed struggle; while the final phase began in the postcolonial struggle of the 1970s (Falola 2021, 22).' In this third phase, which is continuing, a starting point for the aforementioned decolonizing project can be noted. At that same time, the institutionalization of the study of religion began with the establishment of chairs of Africa-related history and of religious studies in sub-Saharan regions.

With respect to African philosophy and religion, Kwasi Wiredu (1931–2022) from Ghana describes decolonization as divesting its thinking of 'all undue influences emanating from our colonial past' (Wiredu 2011, xi). He calls for a clarification of African religious concepts that have been misconstrued and distorted by the representatives of Jesus Christ (here Roman Catholic priests preaching to the Acholi, Wiredu 1998, 43–44; Wiredu 2011, xxxvii). This was already the concern of the Ugandan Oxford graduate Okot p'Bitek (1931–1982), who pointed out to African scholars of his time that they continued to use European concepts and adopted attributes of the Christian God to present African deities (p'Bitek 2011, 32–33). In addition, historians criticized the universalization and essentialization of African religions at the beginning of the 1970s (Ranger and Kimambo 1972, 2). It is precisely this essentialization, which was rejected at the time, that is demanded again today by scholars such as Falola.

According to them, traditional African religion (as a singular) must be essentialized in order to advance the decolonization process (Falola 2021, 563; Aderibigbe and Falola 2022).

In a broader sense, the project to decolonize the field of the study of religion and the disciplines concerned with it is driven by all studies that call for 'intellectual decolonization' (Chidester 2004, 86) and conduct critical reappraisal of the academic study. The main concerns address the complexities and challenges of what have become African societies in their global and translocal entanglements, while constantly exploring the limits and possibilities of the project (see Steyn and Mpofu 2021). The entanglements and interdependencies of *African* and *Western/European*, which cannot be resolved, have long been pointed out (Ludwig and Adogame 2004, 2) and, in addition, studies resulting from multiple approaches of historicizing and analysing the discourses are of great value for the study of the Africa-related religions (see the concept of 'global Africa', proposed by the UNESCO programme The General History of Africa). Therefore, the occupations, appropriations, realignments, or rewritings of concepts which originated from Eurocentric viewpoints are part of the project of decolonizing the field (for example, on the concept of fetish, see Davies 1998; Appiah 2022).

Ongoing debates on the decolonization of the entire study field, which have so far been dominated by studies from male-positioned academics, seem to approach the task of reconceptualizing Africa-related religions as the responsibility of researchers with a (further to be determined) specific connection to Africa. From a female-positioned perspective in the German-speaking world, the author discusses different responsibilities. Obviously, as Mahmood Mamdani has pointed out, there is a certain need for reconsidering 'the colonial legacy that each of us is either a native or a settler' (presumably considering himself as 'nonindigenous immigrant[s]'; Mamdani 2001, 664, 656). Thus, the author's ancestors are mainly part of two totalitarian regimes, the National Socialist and the socialist. In addition, the author belongs to a former colonial power in African contexts and lives in a post-socialist context in which misanthropy and nationalist worldmaking are (again) becoming more noticeable in society, the media, and politics.

The following argumentation scrutinizes the significance of *positionalities* of researchers, which imply their perspectivity in the process of knowledge production, their differentiable legacies, and their positions in time and space. Accordingly, the argumentation that follows builds on the concept of translocal entanglements and develops it further regarding questions of agency in multivalent power asymmetries as they manifest in the Africa-related study of religions. As a starting point, *translocality* refers to the networks, institutions, and conditions under which Africa-related scholars acted and counteracted in the imperialist structures. According to Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen, translocality seeks to highlight 'the fact that the interactions and connections between places, institutions, actors and concepts have far more diverse, and often even contradictory effects than is commonly assumed' (Freitag and Von Oppen 2010, 5). While underlining the vitality of economic issues and power structures in the institutionalization of the field, this article discusses translocality together with positionality on the basis of Eurocentric (historical) descriptions of Africanness concerning concepts of race, spatiality, and an alleged lack of 'Christian' civilization. Localizable places or identities are thus of less interest.

By examining a historical case relevant to the study of African religions, the interconnectedness and entanglements of actors and their *trans*-localities in the project of decolonizing the field of study, which was already going on before its institutionalization, are analysed. The contribution then promotes the project of decolonization as an open and unfinished debate and task for *all* researchers and institutions—without claiming to offer a solution to power asymmetrical structures or to ever 'overcome the legacy of colonialism' (Falola 2021, 421). Ultimately, this open-endedness also applies to efforts for a localization and positioning of spaces and actors in the production of knowledge on *Africa*, whereby an

awareness of the differing share in the (neo-)colonial present must continue to shape the multi-perspective collaboration in the field.

Institutionalizing the Study of Religions in Africa Translocally

Early Institutions

On the one hand, *Islam* and *Christianity* in Africa present decisive factors in the institutionalization of an academic study of African-related religions in terms of research, teaching, and spreading their concepts of religion (see madrasas and mission schools). Interests in trade and exploitation played a major role here. With reference to a Christian value system, these enterprises were legitimized by the hegemonic claim of bringing civilization or cultivation and the objective of transforming a subordinate society by the dominant society (see Barth and Hobson 2020, 1–2). On the other hand, and in a wider sense, African communities always maintained ways of teaching traditions and dynamic adopting—through family members, certain authorized persons, times and places; through auralities, in performing dances or specific movements, songs, music, rhythms, various practices, and elements expressing their *worldviews* (understood here as contextual and situational ways of sense-making).

Focusing on educational institutions, the study of African-related religions and the conceptualization of *Africa* were realized in translocalities. Spatiotemporal interconnectedness was produced through languages, communication media, economic aspects, and social connections like family relationships. As an imaginary space, Africa was above all a product of imperial interests of appropriation (see the Roman province of northern Africa). In accordance with the world map in Mercator projection (since 1569), territories north of the Sahara became home to the oldest institutions of higher education (still in operation today), such as the Ez-Zitouna University in Tunis (est. in 737) and the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez (est. 859), both founded as madrasas.

Institutionalized education in sub-Saharan Africa was an instrument of European conquests, their regimes, and the resettlement of freed or poor Africa-descended persons in today's Liberia and Sierra Leone. Colleges and universities were situated in Freetown, the Fourah Bay College (est. 1827 as an Anglican missionary school); in Cape Town, the South African College/Zuid-Afrikaansche Athenaeum, which is the present University of Cape Town (est. 1829 in relation to the Dutch Reformed Church); and in Monrovia, the Liberia College (est. 1862). Most instructors were Christian missionaries. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Christian instructors also included locals from West Africa or African-American settlers from the United States (Carpenter 2019, 4). These institutions served the interests of re-education, re-training, doctrinal instruction, and conversion and thus the ideologies of civilization or cultivation. They are widely recognized as institutions of higher education, where the existing chairs for the study of religion were established.

Chairs for the Study of Religion

During the nineteenth century, all higher education institutions in Africa were modelled after European and US-American learning centres. These had to serve mainly Christian educational goals, just like their church-based role models. Therefore, the institutionalized study of Africa-related religions was of no interest in the curricula; rather, it was a key component in establishing new disciplines like ethnology in (West) Europe and the United States. Whereas, on the African continent, the civilizing mission included the concept of *education* through literacy and anglicization as an efficacious strategy. Andrew Walls (1928–2021) euphemistically illustrated this fact by referring to the Anglican clergyman and secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Henry Venn (1796–1873), who described the literacy rate of the

educated population in Sierra Leone as higher than in England or Prussia, an obvious result of the Anglican and Methodist missionary's work (Walls 2019, 14). Thus, the idea of the Christian civilizing project—(US-)Europeans bringing higher education to Africa—has survived to this day through the reproduction of success narratives (see also James Beale Africanus Horton or Tiyo Soga as prototypes of the African intellectual, Walls 2019, 15; Adick 2020). Numerous new foundations of (private) Christian universities in recent decades, made possible with personnel and funding mostly from the United Kingdom and the United States, seem to provide conclusive evidence of this (see Lunkwitz 2022; Carpenter 2017).

The imperialist expansions of the European power structures involved the institutionalization of Eurocentric education and socialization, especially since the second half of the nineteenth century. During the struggles for decolonization and under the banner of nation-building in the 1960s and early 1970s, public state universities were established as flagship institutions. For creating national and united African *identities*, the institutionalized study of Africa-related religions on the continent became a more comprehensive task through historiographical and conceptualizing narratives.

To create chairs and institutions for the study of religions related to Africa, one had (and still has) to deal with this Christianization of education, the violent colonial past, and the present of epistemological hegemony. Thus, one had to focus on forward-looking debates about the relationship between theologizing, historicizing, and anthropological approaches to the study of religion. Institutionalized studies of religions related to Africa were either conducted in other disciplines under the claim of keeping out references to Christianity and Islam (see Ranger and Kimambo 1972) or were developed as theological disciplines at state universities under the name 'Religious Studies' (on the University of Ghana, see King 1975, 362). The history of higher education in Africa thus raises the question of *how* religion was conceptualized and studied in educational institutions that emerged from translocal entanglements, including colonizing interests, sources, and actors.

However, the project of decolonizing the field and its disciplines by no means describes a linear development. Collaborating strategically, European-educated African actors often endeavoured to maintain (trans-)local traditions by using the predetermined concept of education and the languages of the colonizers. Referring to this, the ongoing debate does not represent a reactionary response that would only problematize the *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Ludwig and Adogame 2004), but rather offers productive dynamics in conferences, discussions, and publications which deal both with the current issues of the field and the challenges in Africa-related societies (see, for instance, *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* and *African Traditions in the Study of Religion, Diaspora and Gendered Societies*, Adogame et al. 2012 and 2013).

In the following section, a specific case analysis focuses on the entanglements of the United States and Europe with Liberia around 1900 regarding the institutionalization of an independent education system and the importance of language for the study of Africa-related lives and religions.

The Translocal Institutionalization of an Independent Education System in Liberia

To develop and further develop sustainable collaborations and (decolonial) approaches for the future study of Africa-related religions, analysing the special role of Liberia in the establishment of educational institutions can be advantageous. In 1847, Liberia declared its independence from the United States, which was recognized by the United States fifteen years later. The Constitution of the Republic, which was largely based on the Constitution of the United States, demonstrated the legally protected practice of everyone's (meant every male) own religion. Supremacy was given to 'the Christian Religion' (*Preamble*), which provided the guarantor of

tolerance in the question of practicing religion (Art. I, Sec. 3). Nonetheless, African agents founded educational institutions and thereby institutionalized practiced local religions in US-Europeanized learning systems. Many of these civilization mission workers were born in places in West Africa or returned to the continent from enslavement in the United States.

However, in the case of Momulu Massaquoi (1869/70–1938), who was born to a Muslim royal couple in Sierra Leone and who learned English at a Liberian missionary school, he returned from his studies at Central Tennessee College in the United States. In 1893, Massaquoi was the only representative from Africa to speak at the World's Parliament of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (see Barrows 1893). In the 1920s, he worked as Consul General of Liberia in Hamburg and taught the Vai language at the University of Hamburg. Massaquoi and his family members are significant examples of the entanglements concerning education, religion, and politics between the United States, the German Empire, and Liberia.

Josiah Strong (1847–1916), who was the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in the United States and whose thought became the philosophical foundation of the Social Gospel movement around 1900, represented Massaquoi as a convert to Christianity and thus as a success of the US-European civilization educational project (see Strong 1894). Strong, who was a congregational minister, widely promoted his understanding of the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race (see Strong 1885), whose destiny it was to conquer the other parts of the world. In his view, the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled to Christianize and civilize worldwide, and so, in the final competition of races, it will hasten the coming of the kingdom of God. Along with his biographical success narrative on Prince Momulu Massaquoi, Strong outlined the elements of his civilizing project.[1]

Later, the professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, Frederick Starr (1858–1933), wrote about his vision of a 'Liberian success' for an 'African Redemption' concerning issues of religion, economy, society, and the government. In his narrative of success, according to the description of the French Consul in Monrovia, Maurice Delafosse (1870–1926), Massaquoi is presented in relation to *Christianity*, but also to a concept of *indigenous civilization*:

> These natives, half islamized, have, much more than the Liberians, the sentiment of human dignity, […] a certain æsthetic character. […] a superior intelligence of commercial affairs. The Vai have even a self-civilization […] they possess an alphabet suited to the writing of their language, and this alphabet, which they have completely invented themselves, has no relationship with any other known alphabet. A Vai native named Momolu Massaquoi has just established at Ghendimah, not far from the Anglo-Liberian boundary, a sort of model village, and in this village, a school where he proposes to teach the language and the literature of his country […] being an attempt purely indigenous in character toward perfectment (Delafosse in: Starr 1913, vii–viii).

This ideal of education reproduced the concept of a higher, progressive *education* orientated towards written and printed texts. It was interested in the commercialized maximization of profits and located in the concepts of beauty and morality from a Eurocentric perspective. Overall, Starr emphasized Massaquoi's special intermediary role as 'chief clerk in the Department of the Interior' between the mission and Qur'an schools and with regard to the political interests between all groups and educational institutions. Massaquoi wrote textbooks to teach 'the Americo-Liberians' at public schools in the Vai language. In addition, Starr's description demonstrates that he also acted as the most important mediator between the

[1] Strong's programme of *Christian civilization* included the free decision for the Christian religion; speaking English with 'accuracy and fluency'; 'going to Africa […] for the uplifting of all Africa'; 'stepping into positions of authority' for this purpose; and being civilized as a guarantor of morality and humanity (Strong 1894, 11).

government and the Muslims in the country (Starr 1913, 146). These efforts can later be recognized in the life of Massaquoi's daughter Fatima Massaquoi (1911–1978), who continued to work for the appreciation of local names and the standardization of the Vai language (see Massaquoi 2013).

Momolu Massaquoi himself highlighted the political-strategic significance of 'Christianity' ('small in number') as an 'element that manipulates the machinery of government', alongside 'Paganism' ('the largest number') and 'Islam' ('most of the advanced tribes') (Massaquoi 1926, 46). As a cooperation partner in a political leadership position, he opened the aforementioned school as an 'industrial school' in 1900. In addition to Vai, English and Arabic were also taught at the school. Massaquoi thereby intended ''to develop an African civilization independent of any, yet, like others, on a solid Christian principle''. In his view, the concept of 'European civilization' included the devastating 'liquor traffic' and the 'polygamy' practiced by European merchants in particular. While Massaquoi appreciated the efforts of the missionaries in teaching the Vai both English and their own language as a printed language, he also argued against the lack of unity among Christian denominations (Massaquoi 1905, 449, 450, 451).

In sum, having gained a certain political influence through positions and transimperialist cooperation, Momolu Massaquoi, at the same time, followed the educational concepts resulting from entanglements and used them strategically within the existing power asymmetries. Massaquoi thus opted for an *education* that was not obviously linked to the concept of *religion* at the time but which enabled him to work towards his goal of an *independent African civilization* by promoting the local languages on the one hand and the language of the 'oppressors' (Massaquoi 1905, 452) on the other. His case can be taken further on the question of positionalities in current collaborations with the interest of decolonizing the study of Africa-related religions.

Interwoven and Differentiable Positionalities in the Decolonizing Project

Massaquoi's education concept was relevant to the Liberian society as a whole; it contained concrete criticism of European arbitrary rule over people and its exploitative forms of government on the continent. According to him, the treatment of locals by the Europeans could only be regulated with a petition written by intellectuals, including 'natives, missionaries, and travelers' from different parts of Africa, and sent to the colonial governments on behalf of all Africans. A 'council of friends of Africa' is therefore to be convened to draw up this program 'for the protection of Africans from the evils of civilization' (Massaquoi 1905, 452). Massaquoi's demand is primarily intended to counteract the cause of suffering as effectively as possible.

Against this background, it can be emphasized in the debate on decolonization approaches that all researchers are positioned in translocal entanglements, but in dynamic power constellations which continuously challenge them to act decisively against injustice. Their perspectives represent the results of affiliations and historical development. Depending on the specific colonial legacy that researchers and communities have to deal with and the affectedness by the European-constructed ideologies of 'race', 'ethnicity', 'blackness', and 'Africanness', as well as their involvement in injustices arising from their own family histories, the decolonization project challenges everyone, but in different ways.

Decolonizations do not take place beyond a Eurocentricity; every ideology of Afrocentricity responded to a concept of 'Europe' defined by the silencing and strategically disrupting and conquering of voices of resistance against injustices (like the formation of language monopolies through epistemologies in the education system). Today, the study of Africa-related religions faces questions of (re-)conceptualizing as an entangled study in theoretical approaches and practical collaboration forms.

Three interrelated foci can be identified for academic thinking and collaboration. The aim here is to create a sensitivity for the current *power imbalances* and to sharpen awareness of *differentiable responsibilities*[2] resulting from diverse affectednesses of the colonial past and neocolonial present. Both these claims and questions about translocally *entangled research* perspectives can help to further characterize the horizon of collaboration. All three focus areas require further clarification.

Rethinking Global Collaboration in the Study of Africa-Related Religions

Setting the scholarly agenda of the study of religion with a focus on Africa constantly implies exploring the asymmetries of power according to concepts of *agency* from the perspectives of those who resist and are positioned with fewer opportunities for action. The academic international study of religion is thereby located at the intersections of numerous inequalities (with regard to *race, gender, sexuality, class, nation,* and *religion*) that run vertically along the academic hierarchy and need to be addressed in a gender-sensitive way, as the academic enterprise has been dominated by 'white'-positioned masculinities for centuries.

Researchers, including the author (who works in particular on Christian missions and colonial rule), have to reflect on the entangled historical conditions in their context and address the barriers to excellent local research through political corruption and mismanagement. The complex economic challenges and globalization processes as mechanisms of exclusion and the language barriers due to monolingualisms also determine the visibility of international studies in Africa-related religions from most of the African countries. Young people, who make up the majority of the population, and early career researchers are particularly affected by these aspects.

A position-sensitive decolonization of the field of study concentrates on strengthening Africa-based institutions and collaborations to build a strong research infrastructure on the continent. Accordingly, the first conference of the African Association for the Study of Religion in Harare, in 1992, articulated its aim as, foremost, promoting the networking of scholars on the African continent (Hackett 1993, 69). For a translocal process of decolonizing the research fields, multiple forms of collaborative networking are therefore worth realizing, wherein the conceptualization of *Africa(s)* as constructed and imagined spaces is continuously negotiated by the invited and inviting scholars. Collaborations must focus on various levels, such as transcontinental (see Ludwig and Adogame 2004; Adogame et al. 2012) and transnational cooperation related to continental regions and cooperation that is dedicated to a specific African context or pursues the goal of representing the entire Africa-related world.

Concerning the anglophone collaborative networking, many studies appear to engage with the Nigerian and US-American,[3] South African, East African, and some other contexts—also related to the British colonial past. In order to be able to conduct representative research on 'Africa' and Africa-related religions, the possibilities of linking the various research language areas in translingual spaces of cooperation, for example, with the Arabic-speaking, francophone, or lusophone research world, could become a future task for the field of study (a feasible starting point can be the establishment of non-English-speaking panels at AASR conferences).

[2] For example, epistemological approaches to lived religions with a focus on Africa should always be developed in collaboration with practitioners and local experts in the field of research.

[3] See *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion* (2022): The 46 chapters in the volume are predominantly written by men who are located in the US and/or Nigeria. Exceptions are Tenson Muyambo (Zimbabwe) and Kelvin Onongha (Kenya).

African spatiality could further be organized in translocal entanglements concerning certain topics (like religion and the global economy), common issues, social relations (like early career researchers' networks; see the AASR Women's Caucus), or related to scholars of common (African) languages, traditions, and practices. Medial connectivity, especially via the digital possibilities, will further play a vital role in creating collaboration forums and imagining Africanity, communality, and religion. On the one hand, this opens ways to rethink concepts of *Africa* and *agency* in knowledge production, beyond the map-constructed concepts of Africa from colonizing geographers; on the other hand, one has to deal with questions of data protection and a critical reflection on algorithm-based results in the research process (see the Digital Humanities).

To summarize, the conceptualization of *Africa* and the created interconnectedness is of crucial relevance for framing the study of religions, for example, in the context of the AASR. Dichotomies in the creation of the world (West/East, North/South, Europe/Africa, and also Africa as centre/diaspora as periphery) thereby obscure the translocal and dynamic interdependencies in complex power constellations. So, the alleged shift in Christianity from the global North to the global South refers to a concept of (African) Christianity produced under imperialist auspices since the nineteenth century, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, many studies in the anglophone academic world seem often to reproduce the dichotomous division of the continent by colonial rulers and historiographies by silencing the early Christianities (for instance, see Augustine of Hippo 354–430). Furthermore, in this debate of homogenization, certain conservative values, with which a global South (Africa, Asia) is constructed in a unifying way, are propagated for an equally homogeneously produced North (Europe, the United States) (see Jenkin's mention of the controversy about a queer Anglican bishop and his positioning of aligning with 'Global South Christianity', Jenkins 2007, 115, 124).[4]

It is remarkable that the West/East dichotomy is hardly used in this debate. First, this results in creating a 'whitened' concept of Christianity and suppressing many Christianities and multiple entangled hybridities in Christian traditions. Second, this conceals the activities of (Christian) new religious movements from the United Kingdom and the United States using 'humanitarian aid' for strategic member recruiting in Africa. Ongoing debates on African religions, which underline their value for the study of religion and demonstrate their social relevance, could, in the next step, initiate studies on the effects of the increasingly influential organizations (for example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) on the communities of Africa-related religions.

In general, the decolonizing project of writing against the division of the continent to rediscover translocal narratives and questions of negotiation on *Africa* and *religion* is not a new one (see *General History of Africa I*)[5], but an open-ended and unfinished debate. To imagine and locate a future when the colonial legacy has been overcome (cf. Falola 2021, 421) would be illusory. Transdisciplinary and multi-perspective approaches in pluralities can further dynamize the debate. The concept of 'global Africa', for instance, provides new impulses for the deconstruction of familiar spatial imaginations. Nevertheless, it can also be argued here that

[4] In his speech, Paul Jenkins addressed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He explains his concept of the Global South Christianity as 'more traditional in their view of religious authority', 'charismatic', and 'committed to ideas of healing', 'more [compared to his Global North concept] supernaturally' (Jenkins 2007, 114). Entanglements concerned with spiritism, spiritualism, and theosophy, which all emerged decisively from Christian traditions, are overlooked. Moreover, with a focus on Africa, Christian missionaries formed and further developed their constructs of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, secret societies, and occultism.

[5] Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow pointed to the colonizers' separation in racial stereotyping of notions of 'black' and 'white': 'the continent of Africa was hardly ever looked upon as a historical entity. […] Hermetic frontiers were drawn between the civilizations of Ancient Egypt and Nubia and those of the people south of the Sahara' (M'Bow 1990, vii).

this concept in singular form does not guarantee an escape from Eurocentric power relations, within which positions are negotiated and concrete entanglements are established by concrete agents.

Conclusion: Three Theses for a Decolonization in/of the Field

This contribution illustrated that it is not possible to overcome colonially produced realities once and for all, but that analysing and describing power relations and strategic action within them requires constant confrontation. Thus, the council demanded by Momolu Massaquoi above to protect the people on the continent from the harmful effects of so-called civilization has never taken place, and dichotomous worldviews attempting to position *Africa* continue to be reproduced in academic studies. Therefore, the project of decolonization must be carried on as a common unfinished project, strategically and realistically, corresponding to the differentiable colonial legacies.

To summarize, the following three essential theses emerge with respect to the tasks to which studies in Africa-related religions should devote themselves or continue to devote themselves in the future:

(1) For the study of Africa-related religions that considers translocalities and positionalities in specific power dynamics in educational institutions, a decolonizing project remains an open, never-ending debate on the conceptualization of *Africa/Europe*, *religion*, and knowledge production in multivalent entanglements.

With respect to epistemological questions of knowledge production in the project of decolonizing the field of study, (re-)negotiations of the concepts of *Africa—Religion—Coloniality* and their translocal and global entanglements should be high on the agenda. While doing so, the positionalities in power asymmetric relations in academia and societies will have to be discussed and taken into consideration. As a result, current challenges in the institutionalized field of research can be addressed and tackled efficiently.

(2) With respect to the means of communication and research language used in academia, the decolonization project in religion-related research must be continuously dedicated to the critical analysis of global power relations, anglicization in the international academy, the forced relocation of people from the African continent, and certain contexts that have been omitted or under-represented in the anglophone study of Africa-related religions (for example, regions like Australasia and the Pacific).

Multi-perspectivity and diversity in terms of language, territorial representation, gender, religion, and social class present issues to reflect, intersectionally, on and ensure in the organizational forms of collaboration. To emphasize the multiple voices of resilience and resistance of so-called vulnerable groups, one-dimensional concepts of power and agency need further discussions (see the strong focus on specific dynamics in Christianity-related communities, while, for example, Orthodox Christianity, Muslim, and Jewish life in the sub-Saharan region play a subordinate role in English-language publications on Africa-related religions from the United States, United Kingdom, or Western Europe, probably due to the history of the disciplines in the field).

(3) The decolonizing project has to deal with the structural consequences of the different positionalities in the field of study and its institutionalized organizations. Significant factors arising from *diverse affectednesses* by neocolonial injustices and from the deeds and suffering of the *respective ancestors* frame the differentiable responsibilities and competences in academic study on Africa-related religion; in gender studies, they are also discussed under *indigeneity regarding the continent*, *African descent*, and a *shared socio-political location* (see Nash et al. 2024, ii). This positioning regarding 'Africanness' results from concrete

perspectives. So, the critical project of decolonization has to face the constant task of interlinking the questions of the effects of Eurocentric ideologies with a productive identification of entanglements and dynamics.

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