

Africa Knows! It is time to decolonise minds

Panel E35:

5 February 2021, 2pm

Title:

Towards a multispecies approach to African Studies

Abstract:

Scientific evidence nowadays leaves no doubt that humans differ from animals only in degree and not in kind. Human exclusivity and anthropocentrism therefore no longer hold, hence non-human animals, and their absences / invisibilities, need to be included in African Studies. However, taking non-human animals as serious participants or 'respondents' in African Studies, in the same ways that humans are part of such research, comes with huge theoretical and methodological challenges. The anthropocentrism of conventional African Studies has not really equipped scholars with tools to answer these intellectual challenges in adequate ways so far. Nonetheless attempts are increasingly made all over the African continent and universities (as elsewhere around the globe) to rectify this reductionist approach and include non-human animals in the African Studies research practices.

Paper presentations:

- Vanessa Wijngaarden: Experiments in using non-human animals as 'respondents' by working with Southern African animal communicators: traversing the nature/culture divide and implications for scientific knowledge making
- William Ellis: The multispecies and multisensorial classroom: walking with herders to find giant grazing snakes, Gods dog and to learn from the plants
- Harry Wels: Are we smart enough to include more-than-human sentience in African Studies?

Discussions:

Because in this panel we had ample time for the three papers, the presenters could take their time to present their papers in quite some detail. It was for all to see (i.e. Power Point Presentations) and hear that the presenters had thoroughly prepared their presentations. The general discussion after Vanessa's presentation focused on the question about what it implies to do away with the human-animal binary. As the category 'animals' comprises of literally millions of species and on the other side of the binary there is only the one human species, what does the absence of a boundary between humans and all the other millions of animal species mean for relations between them? An ant and a lion are both in the category of 'animal', but they relate differently to humans and vice versa. How to go about this when we try to think more inclusively about species?

After William's presentation the main question discussed was about how to get the topic of a multispecies approach to African Studies (and more in general) on the public agenda? The example of Peter Wohlleben's bestseller (2015) 'The hidden life of trees' was mentioned as something that has accelerated our acceptance to think about trees and plants as agentic and with lives of their own. Does the topic of multispeciesism need bestsellers, 'celebrities', high profile attention, to get it on everyone's mind and get it more accepted ('normal') in the process? In response it was mentioned that how we think about multispecies intersects with how we think about other diversity issues that loom very big in current day society like race, decolonisation and gender. Maybe that is a way how multispeciesism can be made more relevant and accepted to think through?