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European Association of Social Anthropologists

Africanists Network - inter conference workshop

Fieldwork in Africa today: New Options & challenges

venue: Max- Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, main seminar room
30 & 31 March 2012, 14 :00 to 17:00, 10:00 to 16:00

Call for contributions

The aim of the workshop is to invite outstanding **junior scholars** (EASA members) engaged in current research projects in the Anthropology of African societies, primarily to discuss issues of research methods, strategies of fieldwork and reflexivity, related to ongoing research projects. The workshop, that also includes experienced senior scholars, is intended to provide a space of exchange and discussion. Basically, anthropological fieldwork rests upon an a priori of participant observation, engaged dialogic practices and an involvement in the daily lives of people we study. Beyond these common ideals and demands, there is no such thing as a fixed canon of methods and strategies, as there are various topics, sites and circumstances that demand a flexible combination and a diversity of methodical “tools”. Fieldwork has its own dynamics, requires flexibility that urges us often to adjust our methods according to the (changing) circumstances. We would like to bring these issues into a floor of exchange and debate, to learn from each other and to develop new ideas pertinent to various current projects. The aim of the workshop is thus to rethink our practices and approaches, also given that many things have changed in the last decades that are affecting our fieldwork practices: the existence of ICT, above all the mobile phone, that increases levels of connectivity to the field, but also creates new constraints of networked fieldwork positions, increasing accessibly also of far remote places. Related to that, the development of “permanent field sites” to explore on and off new constitute methodological challenges. New approaches are especially stemming from the field of Science and Technology Studies as well as Actor-Network-Theory, cultural ecology, but also from “new kinship” and gender studies , cognitive anthropology and a growing worldwide competition of texts, images on our subjects, produced by various centres. As anthropologists we also use our bodies as instruments for gathering data. As a result, the human capacities we use in social encounters in the field have a large influence on our level of success, making social skills and strategies as well as reflexivity fundamental. A central focus will be on creative and (quasi-) experimental methods that may enhance our fieldwork practices. Experimental methods are here conceptualised as approaches within a given fieldwork- related project that either are chosen

as an additional tool to enhance the chosen methods so far, or as a distinct part of the research agenda aiming at the exploration of some particular aspects where other (standard) methods do not seem to be appropriate. Examples: working with drawings, with role changes etc. These methods are then chosen to break, to change a given strategy, not as a (idealised) “alternative”. Most often, they relate anthropological issues to methods from other (sub-) fields, but here not necessarily constitute the main or central approach. Finally, it is important to think further, what to do with our findings in terms of a general representation of methodological issues in monographs, films, websites, preparing a joint essay, visible online, and creating a network of further exchange to enhance the community of knowledge. The latter aspect is of a particular importance, to sustain the outcome of the debates, to develop further ideas for workshops as well as joint publications in and outside EASA. The workshop may include

- Presentations by participants (main methodical choices & constraints of individual research projects)
- an overview of recent methodological innovations /news approaches in the Anthropology of Africa
- debates on flexibility and adaptability based on case studies
- quasi experimental and participatory methods – prospects and their limits
- discussion on ways of teaching and improving methodological learning processes
- slides and short films

The call for contributions primarily addresses junior scholars that should use the attached declaration of interest to apply by 30th September 2011. Participants will be selected by 15th October 2011. Basic travel costs will be provided for a limited number of participants (EASA members living outside the Halle / Leipzig area). Extended abstracts (4pages) are then expected by January 30th 2012, to enable us to compile a reader.