

Susanne Gehrmann, Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong (eds.)

Crossings and Comparisons
in African Literary and Cultural Studies

Susanne Gehrman, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

LuKA

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Editors:

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild and Tobias Wendl

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Herausgeber/innen:

Susanne Gehrman, Flora Veit-Wild und Tobias Wendl

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Crossings and Comparisons in African Literatures and Cultures: Introduction

Susanne Gehrman and Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong

Foregrounding contemporary perspectives on African literatures and cultures produced in a variety of languages, the essays compiled in *Crossings and Comparisons in African Literatures and Cultures* were presented at two academic events which we, the editors, co-organised. Initially, some of the contributions emerged from a panel on “Cross-Connections in African Literary and Cultural Studies” that we co-convened for the African Studies Association Germany (VAD) conference on June 27th-30th, 2018 in Leipzig.¹ Secondly, essays presented at a workshop on “Crossings and Comparisons in African Literary and Cultural Studies,” hosted by the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Chair of African literatures at the Humboldt University in Berlin from October 8th-11th, 2018, make up the larger part of the volume. Funded by the KOSMOS programme at Humboldt University that promotes research cooperation and partnership with international scholars and institutions, we invited speakers from our African partner universities located in Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Togo² as well as scholars based in Berlin.

The challenge we posed for both the VAD panel and the KOSMOS workshop was that papers should deal with cultural production in more than one language and preferably across genres and media to allow for comparative research that goes beyond the mainstream in African literary studies by engaging multiple hermeneutic approaches to African narratives, poetry, orature, cinema, music, the digital, and dramatic arts. The presentations that emerged from both events present a critical assessment of the ideological, aesthetic, thematic, and linguistic models that illustrate similarities, but also differences, which underscore the potential to put African narratives and lyrics conveyed in at least two languages in conversation with one another and to critically assess their impact on genres and theoretical frameworks. For one reason or the other, not all participants of the two events could submit written essays for the collection. However, the spirit of engagement in this cross-linguistic and cross-cultural endeavour and the convivial atmosphere created for our exchanges and debates with all participants resonate throughout this book.

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- 1 The VAD conference was partly funded by the German Research Council (DFG). Colleagues from Israel, Nigeria, the United States, and Germany participated in the panel.
 - 2 The Universities of Nairobi, Ibadan, Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Stellenbosch, Dar es Salaam, and Lomé, respectively. Delegations from Nairobi, Ibadan, Stellenbosch, and Lomé were present at the workshop together with colleagues and doctoral candidates from Humboldt University Berlin, Free University Berlin, University of Vienna, and Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.

Advancing the Visibility of Cross-Connections in African Literary and Cultural Studies

In the past decades, largely following paradigms of postcolonial studies, critique of African literary and cultural productions has predominantly embodied notions of duality, binarity, hybridity, and alterity, defined by categories such as centre-periphery and colonised-coloniser. Advertently or inadvertently, African literary and cultural productions either highlight and explore or question and contest the notions of connections and connectivity in terms of binarity/alterity versus hybridity/transculturality on the levels of content, form, and language. While transcontinental connections between writing in Africa and the African Diaspora have been a focus in recent scholarship, such analysis is more often than not presented with reference to only one major linguistic continuum, namely English/Anglophone or French/Francophone. Less attention has been paid to the intracontinental connections of different African literary fields, systems, and literary trends emerging in different vernacular and vehicular languages. In spite of notable exceptions such as the life-long work of the late eminent Nigerian scholar Abiola Irele (1936-2017) that cuts across French, English, and Yoruba literatures³ or more recently the edited volume *Habari ya English? What about Kiswahili? East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone* (Diegner/Schulze-Engler 2015), paucity still rules comparative research that would open up new critical horizons from the perspective of cross-language, cross-regional, and cross-theoretical studies, which if investigated will open new vistas of connections between different Afriphone and Europhone literatures and cultures that cross all regions of the African continent and into its diasporas. Much of the work that has been done, so far, puts African literatures and cultural productions in regional and linguistic boxes. In addition, there is an urgent need to put different schools of thinking and paradigms of literary theory into dialogue, in order to advance African literary and cultural studies.

The collection of essays, *Crossings and Comparisons in African Literary and Cultural Studies* emerges, therefore, out of the necessity to test and eventually supersede language borders, regional settings, disciplines, and theories through bringing literatures and other cultural expressions such as film and music expressed in various idioms into conversation. Centring mainly contemporary voices on the subject, together with their

3 It must be stated here that a tradition of comparative research is strongly developed in some Nigerian universities, in particular in Modern Languages Departments where literatures in French and Portuguese languages are studied together with Nigerian literatures in English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Also, Departments of German Studies conceived as intercultural studies at universities in Yaoundé, Dschang, Lomé or Dakar have a strong research record in comparative and diaspora studies that combine German and French. Unfortunately, this research is often less visible in research centres based in the Global North. However, as Miriam Maranga-Musonye's and Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong's contributions to the volume indicate with reference to the Kenyan and the Cameroonian situation respectively, evidence of teaching and research in 'boxes' is a reality on the African continent, too.