

Power, Silence and the Production of History in Africa

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Leiden African Studies Assembly & Leiden University Institute for History



The production of history is a process of power. This is particularly relevant in Africa, where during both the colonial and the post-colonial era history has been written by hegemonic regimes. This historiography has in turn (re-)produced structures of domination, social exclusion and division. Moreover, it has obscured the diversity of histories, narratives, spatial geographies that are at play. This in turn raises questions about how we can understand enduring and recurring cycles of conflict on the African continent not only as a result of historic contingency, but also as an outcome of the politics of writing African histories. The African continent is therefore a particular rich context in which to examine the production of history and its relation to power.

To grasp the workings of the structures of power that are created through historic production we're interested in what history means for people themselves in Africa – both the rulers and the ruled, the hegemonic and marginalised, elites and subalterns – and how they act and have acted upon it. As Trouillot (1995) has argued, in the production of history people are simultaneously involved as agents that produce historic narratives and as actors of the events they narrate. History is therefore purposeful, and connects imaginaries about the past, present and future. It thus produces “truths”, but silences unwanted or unimaginable alternatives to hegemonic narratives in the service of the practices of power and domination. Herzfeld (2010) has argued that minority histories are a reminder that multiple truths exist, and that they can challenge hegemonic historic narratives. As such, minority histories may offer unexplored avenues to explore structures of power and domination in Africa.

In this workshop we aim to explore the interface between power and the production of history in Africa. We invite participants to track power and silencing in the production of history in

Africa and the workings thereof in social and political processes in contemporary Africa – e.g. social and political exclusion and marginalisation, the creation of divisions, conflict dynamics, practices of resistance, creation of alternative (discursive) spaces and communities, etc. What does history mean for people, how do they engage with their (silenced) histories to give meaning to their present and future? And are there alternative histories possible, in the form of for example minority histories, subaltern histories or even micro histories that may offer a deeper and more inclusive understanding of current practices of power and domination in the region? In what ways can such insights enable (community level) peace building, aimed at societal trust and social cohesion?

For this one-day event we invite scholars and PhD candidates working on African history and related themes to exchange ideas and insights. We are particularly interested in papers that offer multi-disciplinary approaches, including History, Literature, Arts and Culture, Anthropology, Political Science, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies.

Deadline for abstracts (max 500 words): 1 March 2018. Abstracts can be sent to m.j.de.goede@hum.leidenuniv.nl