

THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN STUDIES IN THE UK

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ABSTRACT For whom do we research Africa and for what purpose? We, as scholars working outside of and within Africa on Africa-related research projects and teaching, should periodically return to this question in order to reflect on the challenges, opportunities and legitimacy of our own work. From colonial times in which constituent disciplines within African Studies were aiding dominant powers to grasp knowledge of local contexts to facilitate control, to the 60s and 70s when African Studies was called upon to produce new understandings of Africa in and for post-colonial times to more contemporary endeavours, African Studies presents different morphologies in each era and in each context. This short article reflects on the state of African Studies in the UK and more broadly in Europe in recent times, highlighting reconfigurations brought about by national and international challenges such as migration, European divisions, funding, institutions, networks and most recently, who produces knowledge about Africa and for whom.

Key Words: African studies; United Kingdom; Europe; Decolonisation; Academy.

INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to trace the evolution of African Studies against the African colonial encounter. This would oversimplify matters. While it is undoubtedly true that the concerns of Africanists have reflected the realities of colonialism and everything thereafter and indeed the institutional birth of African Studies⁽¹⁾ as an academic discipline is inextricably linked to the colonial period, African Studies is also bound up in the changing nature of higher education in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, and in multi-layered dynamics of global knowledge production. More recently still, greater attention is being paid to how academia has constructed Africa and Africans as the object of the western gaze as part of a wave of broader intellectual reflection on decolonising knowledge. This has consequences for how academia frames Africa in classrooms, in journals, books and online, and indeed who is able to enter those fora and legitimately wield knowledge. To understand where contemporary African Studies is at, then, requires contextualisation in the classroom, in the academy, and in Africa.

This article seeks to reflect on where British (and to a lesser extent European) African Studies is now. This requires tracing the genesis of the discipline, placing the discipline within the trajectories of universities in Europe and in Africa, and finally reflecting on whether present day African Studies is fit for purpose: Does its historical evolution and institutional setting generate genuine learning and knowledge about and for Africa, or can it not escape the shackles of its own past? How should and how can Africa be researched and taught in the present?

A GENEALOGY OF AFRICAN STUDIES

Several commentators have rehearsed (cf., Mamdani, 1998; Mudimbe, 1988) African Studies' exogenous roots and modes of teaching. African Studies, as an academic discipline, has typically been developed outside of Africa, not within it, and has been initiated as a study of Africa by non-Africans. At its origins, African Studies tended to highlight the exotic and characterise Africa as a negative of western normality (Mbembe, 2001). While critics of African Studies argue about its intellectual separation from the continent of Africa, African Studies has not necessarily been practiced at a physical distance at any given time. In particular, within anthropology, a longstanding core constituent of African Studies, researchers were often very committed to long-term, ethnographic methods. Even when this was the case there tended to be a conceptual difference: Africa was framed as a "living laboratory" ripe for insights to be gleaned (Tilley, 2011).

The context of exogenous African Studies was colonialism, then the Cold War. History tended to frame Africa as a triptych of pre-colonisation, the period of colonial control, then the period independence. This led to the refraction of Africa through its relationship to, and power relations with, Europe. The *longue durée* of precolonial history was often concertinaed and the periods of colonialism and post-colonialism given added weight and emphasis. This created a false equivalence between pre-colonialism and everything after that further served to strengthen the narrative of Africa only being understood via the absence and then the presence of western influences.

The emphasis on the relationship between Europe and Africa not only influenced the discipline of history, it also delineated geographies and ultimately the boundaries of African Studies too. African Studies (or in France *Afrique Noir*) came to mean sub-Saharan Africa, while North Africa was parcelled off into Middle Eastern Studies. African Studies, therefore, came to represent the portions of Africa given most intense scrutiny under colonisation. Similarly, within sub-Saharan Africa western national interests implicitly and explicitly generated nationalistic and linguistic strands of African Studies—Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone. The Euro-centric linguistic strands are telling of how African Studies was constituted, and has implications for the discipline today, that will be picked up upon later in this article.

The early history of African Studies is characterised by a focus on a partial continent, shorn of everything north of the Sahara, and a partitioned continent, delineated by the specific political and economic interests, and linguistic traditions. But what of contemporary African Studies? And, what is the evolution of the discipline to the present day? These questions will be addressed in the following sections.

INTER-DISCIPLINES AND INSTITUTIONS

There has long been a tension between disciplines and interdisciplinary and

multidisciplinary teaching and research. Disciplines remain the intellectual domains around which universities are organised (perhaps especially so in Africa), career progress is judged, and excellence identified. Nevertheless, for several decades there has been a push towards research that combines or borrows from traditional disciplines in order to grapple with complexity and teaching that draws together approaches and perspectives from multiple disciplines in order to equip graduates. African Studies feels some of these changing tensions (Nugent, 2009). There is a tension for academics who must walk a line between their disciplinary roots and the interdisciplinary spaces of area studies, and for institutions who need to productively combine disciplinary breadth and strength with emerging interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary fields. This tension and compromise has shaped the fortunes of African Studies too. Nugent (2009) has argued that African Studies provides a space in which the study of Africa, often marginalised in disciplines, can flourish. It is also possible that African Studies undermines the possibility of the study of Africa fundamentally shaping social sciences. Perhaps what is most important is critical intellectual mass which allows African Studies to generate its own lines of enquiry and shape its own intellectual agenda. There are other tensions and limits within the academy—between a desire to spend extended time in the field researching and the reality of working within universities, between a desire to publish in-depth, long-term projects infrequently and pressures to publish early and often, and between a desire to collaborate with African partners and a need to establish activities and partnerships that provide or attract funding. These new dimensions, of research responsiveness, efficiency and efficacy might generate more outputs, but they may not provide the opportunity for grounded, ethnographically informed and regionally focused research. This may represent a further challenge for African Studies.

The 1980s and 1990s were a gloomy period for African Studies in the United Kingdom. Many of the first generation of scholars who had cut their teeth in the series of centres of African Studies that had been established in the 1960s⁽²⁾ were approaching retirement and not necessarily being replaced, and centres and networks were closing or at least were under the threat of closure as funding contracted in the university sector under the British Conservative Governments of the 1980s and the end of the Cold War lessened political interest in Africa (Robertson, 1985; Twaddle, 1985; McCracken, 1993; Lonsdale, 2000; Bundy, 2002; Nugent, 2007). The new millennium brought a change of fortunes—via renewed political interest, new sources of funding, and new avenues of research. Some centres have enjoyed significant growth since then, notably the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh, other universities have grown their Africanist communities—Leeds, Sheffield, Warwick and Durham for example—and yet others have instituted new centres, first Oxford, then Sussex and more recently the London School of Economics and University College London have opened African Studies centres, joining the School of Oriental and African Studies as real Africanist hubs in the capital.

So why the seeming turnaround? What arrested a seemingly inexorable slide towards disciplinary oblivion? There are probably two main factors, both related to multidisciplinary. Firstly, and generally, multidisciplinary research begun to find

greater favour as we approached the end of the last century, the UK research council made significant investments in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research with a view to connecting up universities into networks that would drive innovation and economic growth (Lyall et al., 2015). While much of these investments were centred around so-called platform technologies such as biotechnology or information and communication technologies they did create more space and flexibility within British universities for other sorts of multidisciplinary. Secondly, and more specifically to African Studies two global policy shifts created new research opportunities. In 2000 the institution of the Millennium Development Goals, which sought to channel collaboration and investment around eight goals led to significant new investments in development assistance, and research aimed at tackling the new priorities. Much of this focus, especially in health and education, was inevitably channelled towards Africa. Five years later the UK Government published its Commission for Africa, which aimed to give further impetus to Africa's development (Commission for Africa, 2005). Around about the same time there was an increasing realisation that complex problems required complex solutions—and that social science was important for assessing development, developing technologies and identifying solutions. In short, African Studies was relevant again as Africa was on the political and economic agenda once more. This presented an opportunity for Africanists as significantly more funding was focused on problems that centred on Africa and focused on understanding why development had not lived up to its promises, especially in the African Continent (Nugent, 2009).⁽³⁾ African Studies, indirectly, received an impetus it had not enjoyed since the early days of the Hayter Commission on area studies, that had called for the setting up for the UK's original network of African Studies centres 40 years before.

EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN “AFRICAN STUDIES”: INCREASINGLY PARALLEL CONVERSATION

Outside of the UK the fortunes of African Studies, and indeed higher education, was more mixed. In Europe, over the past decade or so, African Studies has thrived, and without suffering the dip experienced in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. The AEGIS African Studies network has grown substantially since its launch in 1991, counting members in nearly every member state of the European Union. The traditional powerhouses of African Studies, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and France, retain their strength and some of the larger institutes, notably the Nordic Africa Institute and African Studies Centre Leiden, have increased their size and scope. Beyond Northern Europe research is actively pursued in Italy, Germany and Portugal and there are signs of a growing interest in parts of Eastern Europe as well as they seek to explore new opportunities on the continent.

Of note, has been an increase in the number of doctoral students focusing specifically on African Studies. Large, well supported doctoral programmes in German universities like Bayreuth and Leipzig are producing substantial numbers

of well-trained graduates, and doctoral numbers have also increased in the UK. As Nugent (2009) notes, one of the big issues and discontinuities of higher education in some European countries has been the lack of gainful employment at postdoctoral and especially at mid-career level. It has often been a challenge for graduates in Italy and Germany to secure anything but the most tenuous academic careers. While this has perhaps not regenerated African Studies in those countries research talent has been attracted to opportunities in other parts of Europe, notably the UK and Switzerland. And more recently new researchers have begun to find employment in African institutions, for example at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town.

Funding within the European Union has been an important animator of Africanist research. Africanists have secured a good number of large European Research Council grants, which, unlike traditional social science funding, allow the development of substantial thematic teams of researchers. Other funding streams have encouraged mobility and collaboration within the European African studies community. This enhanced collaboration is all to the good. Although it does serve to underline the significant lack of funding that could mobilise collaboration between Africanists in the UK, Europe and Africa.

In Africa, the situation has been quite different.⁽⁴⁾ African universities have suffered seemingly terminal decline since the 1980s, shocked by the impacts of structural adjustment and the loss of leading academics overseas reducing research capacity. This decline was not universal and nor does it look irreversible elsewhere. A select number of universities have managed to maintain or revive their research cultures. The University of Ghana, Makerere University, Ibadan University and the University of Nairobi (to name a few) have maintained their reputations as some of Africa's leading universities and maintained international connections which have stood them in good stead. Other universities, like the University of Rwanda, are working hard to establish themselves in the top tier. In South Africa, as is often the case when it comes to African Studies, things are a little different with the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Stellenbosch and latterly also the universities of Pretoria and Johannesburg performing well, in relative terms at least.

South Africa's relationship to African Studies is rather complex, bound up in Apartheid and its legacies and an enduring sense of South African exceptionalism (Mamdani, 1998). For South African academics "the Limpopo" could be taken to represent a barrier akin to the Sahara Desert for British Africanists. This is changing of course, fuelled by increasing numbers of students and academics from north of the Limpopo making their way in South African universities. There is still much transformation to take place in South African academia, with increasing clamour for it to take place more quickly and become more representative of South African society and response to that society's needs.⁽⁵⁾ These debates are beginning to resonate across the continent and around the world, and will be returned to shortly.

There are new initiatives that seek to connect academia across Africa. Based in Dakar, Senegal, the Council for the Development of Research in Africa (CODESRIA), has sought for over 40 years to support and disseminate social

science research throughout Africa and work across linguistic, cultural, geographical and economic boundaries to do so. While there is always more to be done, CODESRIA has remained a constant of social science research across the continent.

Much more recently, and again in Dakar, the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) was inaugurated in 2015. ARUA brings together sixteen of Africa's leading universities, including many of which have been mentioned above. The universities are located in a diverse range of countries with all that this entails, but have a shared vision. ARUA aims to expand and enhance the quality of research done in Africa by African researchers. The approach is somewhat different to other alliances, in that the alliance partners themselves are looking to lever fresh support through pooling their own resources and the focus is very much on building institutional relationships between African universities. Many of the concerns of African Studies are priorities for ARUA, for example identity, governance, mobility and inequality. It will be interesting to see if ARUA can give a boost to social sciences (and whether African Studies will be part of an ARUA agenda) within its alliance partners and whether there will be a spill-over effect for African institutions more broadly.

While over the last 10–20 years we can witness positive moves for greater collaboration in Europe and Africa—mobility, partnership and shared ambition—politics can move us in different directions. The UK's higher education sector has been energised by mobility within Europe. The UK's African Studies centres have received a shot in the arm of this internationalisation and it has begun to break down some of the linguistic and colonial delineations that have marked European African studies over the past 40–50 years. It is not uncommon to find African Studies centres where the great majority of academic staff are from outside of the UK (if not yet from Africa in any great numbers).

This is of course, likely to change. Brexit, the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union following a referendum in June 2016, is likely to have significant effects on higher education in the UK (and similarly it is likely that the Trump presidency in the United States will generate its own implications). The withdrawal of the UK from the European Union will have direct implications through a new relationship with the Union and indirect implications through a real or perceived re-prioritising of relationships around the world. Directly, and more immediately once the terms of Brexit have been decided, UK universities risk losing access to European Union common research funding and funding for mobility and exchange. It may also become more difficult for European citizens to live and work in the UK, and indeed less desirable to do so. A final risk is to the strong network of European institutional partnerships. Yes, these partnerships existed prior to the existence of the European Union but they have been sustained and nurtured through the support the European Union has offered. They can be maintained, and doing so is extremely important for UK universities, but this will require effort and resources. They cannot be taken for granted.

Brexit is likely to mean that the UK will seek to strengthen, or re-strengthen, relationships in other parts of the world. Talk has been of forging stronger relationships within the Commonwealth, which includes around 20 African nations

depending on how you count countries whose membership has been suspended in some way. There may be opportunities for new relationships with Africa, and therefore new demands for African Studies to provide insight and answers. At the same time, it is probable that Brexit will also signal a harder line on migration to the UK. It will become more difficult for students and academics from Europe and from Africa to come and study and work in Britain. The re-generative and connective potential of international doctoral scholarship may well be diminished. The complex calculus of the UK seeking new relationships, loosening old ones and how this plays out in a rapidly reprioritising political and economic context has still to be worked out.

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND COSTS OF CONVERGENCE: THE UK CASE

A dynamic that this article has not yet explored is what now constitutes African Studies? In the UK, over the past few decades, we have witnessed something of a rise and fall and rise again, in Europe we have seen more stability amongst African Studies centres and in Africa we have seen a struggle for the academy as a whole to emerge across the continent. While “early” African Studies might be understood as refracted through the twin lenses of colonialism and then the Cold War, “late” African Studies is perhaps somewhat different. There are to an extent some continuities between early and late—the state, development, society—and we must continue to question who is studying Africa and for what purpose. There are discontinuities too. African Studies is no longer concerned with the governing of Africa—of generating the knowledge necessary to effectively administer a colony, or to neatly end that administration. Rather, African Studies could be seen—but should absolutely not only be seen—as contributing to the administering of development, to, with and for Africa. This shift, away from the linguistic, customary and cultural towards the political, economic and infrastructural can be traced from the 1970s onwards, and through the interaction of African Studies with other fields—sociology, politics, geography and development studies.

The latest, emergent concerns of African Studies go beyond engagement with a broader set of disciplines, to reflect on Africa’s place in the world. The notion of “Global African Studies” is beginning to be coined to capture the fluid interplay between Africa and the world. This, along with other dimensions, it is concerned with new global trends and phenomena and how they engage in and with Africa, it is concerned with how Africa and Africans are shaping the world, and fundamentally it is concerned with how knowledge about Africa is constructed and by whom. The lens of African Studies is no longer one-way, mediated by the relationship between Africa and one other place, it is multidimensional, concerned with all facets of Africa’s connections and influences in the world. For example, contemporary research concerns include; the drivers and impacts of climate change, mass migration across and out of Africa, emerging relationships with China and other global powers, the growth and global influence of African religions, the influence of African cultural production—literature, mass media,

music, film, fashion, Africa innovation, communication and banking, the evolution of African capitalism and ultimately the future of Africa as an emergent global power in the next 50–100 years as its population growth outpaces the rest of the world.⁽⁶⁾

By the mid 1980s, a much richer range of sources and disciplines were being brought to bear on our understanding of Africa, and African lives in transition (cf., Watts, 1983). The boundaries between disciplines were being eroded and methodologies shared, which in turn fed into African Studies. Historians were to be found engaged in grounded fieldwork and anthropologists could be found in archives (Nugent, 2009). Bringing disciplines together meant bringing people together and rich vein of collaboration was beginning to be tapped. At the same time, the real impacts of neo-liberalism and globalisation were beginning to be felt across sub-Saharan Africa. Yes, they were felt in universities as mentioned above, but they felt deeply throughout African society. The end of the Washington Consensus, or at least the end of any consensus, marked the beginning of a certain amount of reflection on what had been the certainties of Africa's future development (Gore, 2000). One of the main critiques of the consensus was its insensitivity to local contexts and needs, any blanket of policy prescriptions was inevitably going to disappoint (Williamson, 2004). Here, then, was an opportunity for African Studies to move beyond interesting vignettes and delve for deeper truths.

The reanimation of seemingly flatlining development through the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, the increasing recognition that above all else context and culture matters, and shifts in UK research funding presented a huge opportunity for African Studies and the disciplines with which it interacted. New funding streams from bilateral donors such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) gave more opportunities for African scholars to participate and lead on collaborative research projects, although an unfortunate by-product of a newfound interest by donors in funding north-south collaborative research was a risk in relationships forming where African partners were contracted to undertake research rather than as members of meaningful collaboration. This, positively, has begun to change somewhat slowly, with more thought given to the nature of partnerships by both funders and UK universities.

The convergence of disciplines that has energised African Studies in recent years is not the only convergence pertinent to the constituent disciplines. Development's critique of itself,⁽⁷⁾ coupled with major new investments of funding, has created an opportunity for African Studies to better inform "Development Studies" and for African Studies and Development Studies to become somewhat interchangeable or synonymous, when in Africa (Chambers, 1983; Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1995). There are some advantages to this, larger, more vibrant research communities are created, more disciplines are drawn into interactions with African Studies, and Africanist social science research can and has played a role in making lives better, and sometimes simply not making lives worse.⁽⁸⁾ It would, however, be a mistake if the Millennium Development Goals, now superseded by the Sustainable Development Goals were to frame and dominate much broader African Studies research agendas. Equally, it would be a mistake if African

Studies were not brought to bear when appropriate.⁽⁹⁾

These points suggest opportunity but taken in some suggest a further, deeper question. How can we ensure that African Studies is also shaped from within Africa, configuring new conceptual boundaries, intellectual typologies and engaged communities? A re-iterated, re-tooled African Studies is most welcome, but a reconceptualised African Studies, energised from within Africa, may be yet more welcome still.

DE-COLONISING THE ACADEMY AND DEMOCRATISING AFRICAN STUDIES?

The Rhodes Must Fall movement began at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015. It demanded not only the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from campus, but also the transformation of the curriculum at UCT, the transformation of UCT's academic community to mirror South Africa's racial demographics, and a campus and community to which black students could belong and feel respected (see for example Nyamnjoh, 2016). The movement spread very quickly across South Africa, fuelled by social media, and began to interrogate issues around access to higher education, the emancipatory role of universities, "where is Africa" within African education and even the legitimacy of the government as a deliverer of education and knowledge itself. These issues played out in different ways outside of South Africa and Africa, for example in debates at Oxford University about unproblematic representations of Rhodes as a benefactor and not a central figure of the colonisation of Africa. Debates are beginning to take place within African Studies in Africa and elsewhere, too, for example the "Decolonising the Academy" conference at the University of Edinburgh in April 2016 and through a series of activities at London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

De-colonisation debates are not only about what is taught by whom, they are concerned with who is taught. African higher education is caught in something of a double-bind: There is enormous unmet demand for higher education, yet graduate employment rates remain high. This is partly explained by high general unemployment and working poverty rates in Africa, graduates who are poorly prepared for the workplace, and economies that deliver limited graduate opportunities (ILO, 2016). Unemployment and higher education participation rates are very uneven across Africa, but Africa has the lowest higher education enrolment rates in the world—just seven per cent as opposed to the global average of almost 30 per cent (UN, 2011). Higher education has been expanding across Africa, at twice the global rate, but there is a huge risk of pent up demand, as the 18–23 age group in Africa is expected to grow by more than 50 per cent by 2030 (UN, 2011). Clearly, who attends African universities and what skills they acquire while they are enrolled is of continental importance, and is crucial for Africa's future. African Studies can, and should, inform these debates and should offer spaces to reflect on these big contemporary challenges.

African Studies has historically been most concerned with the relationship

between Africa and Europe, for reasons rehearsed earlier in this paper. Africa had other connections then—such as that with Japan, and it has many more now. Africa's emerging relationship with China is perhaps the most visible manifestation of this but as Africa's population and economic growth rates continue to outstrip the global averages Africa will gain ever greater global purchase. A future African Studies can no longer be bi-lateral, it must be multi-lateral.⁽¹⁰⁾

The most compelling issues facing humanity are profoundly global—climate change, food insecurity, people movements, ill health and political instability (to list a few) are multifactorial and will require knowledge, innovation and above all political will to address. Many of these global issues are likely to impact Africa most severely, and addressing the resilience of African countries, communities and citizens is urgent. Reflecting, too, on the role of a rapidly growing, globalising Africa as both a driver of and a source of solutions for tomorrow's intractable global concerns is another area where an increasingly multidisciplinary African Studies has a role to play.

African Studies is undergoing a “renaissance” in the UK and the rest of Europe. There is more need than ever for a more thoughtful, nuanced and deliberative African Studies if Europe and Africa is to develop a healthier partnership, for the good of both. African Studies has not yet risen in Africa, although important debates about de-colonisation and the future of the African university suggests that there will be an opportunity to do so and an important role to play.

Ultimately, if we are to move from an African Studies that was for the west to understand the Africa it wanted to see, towards an African Studies that collaboratively produces complex and nuanced understandings of Africa as a fluid and active global agent, we need to critically reflect on how we produce knowledge on (and with) Africa, we need to consider who “we” are, and we need to re-think what kinds of institutions are needed to contribute meaningfully to the needs and aspirations of African citizens, communities and countries.

NOTES

- (1) One might consider any distinctions between different flavours of African Studies artificial, but as we will show British African Studies has a specific genealogy, even as it is closely connected to African Studies traditions elsewhere in Europe. The article attempts to highlight those connections where pertinent.
- (2) Many of the UK's African Studies centres were set up in the 1960s as a result of the Hayter Commission (1961), which recommended setting up and supporting a network of area studies centres to assist the UK Government as it began and responded to the process of decolonisation.
- (3) There were also potentially risks, some Africanists were concerned that African Studies might become a sub-field of Development Studies, or that the priorities of funding might narrow the focus of African Studies, previously a real strength.
- (4) Note that this article will not deal directly with African Studies in the United States and in Africa, given their quite different focus and genealogy. Some reference is made to the influence of the United States later in the paper, however.
- (5) See Mamdani (1998), for his insights into the complex recent history of African Studies

- at the University of Cape Town (in some ways a precursor to the later #RhodesMustFall movement started at Cape Town).
- (6) One of the reasons the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh set up the online, open access journal *Critical African Studies* was to provide a more flexible publishing platform to reflect on the broader emerging concerns of African Studies: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaf20>
 - (7) See work on post-development theory (Ferguson [1990] and Escobar [1995], for example) that began to critique the central tenets of development and how knowledge around development was produced.
 - (8) See for example: <http://www.ukcds.org.uk/the-global-impact-of-uk-research>
 - (9) There is yet another convergence that has implications for African Studies in the UK. This is the convergence between the UK Government's aid budgets and its research funding commitments. In order to meet important international commitments to maintain its aid expenditure at least 0.7% of its Gross National Income and not reduce its commitments to funding UK research increasingly large amounts of UK research investment is being targeted at grappling with problems in the Global South.
 - (10) The notion of "global African studies" is gaining some purchase. The University of Johannesburg is opening an institute as part of a global network of African studies centres.

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