

Working Group G
„Future(s) as societal project(s) – actors and their visions
in Africa and beyond”
Summer 2016

“Future(s) as societal project(s) – actors and their imaginations in Africa and beyond” is in the focus of research at the Academy of Advanced African Studies at the University of Bayreuth for the summer term 2016 (for its overall project theme “Future Africa – Visions in Time” see www.bayreuth-academy.uni-bayreuth.de). Its overall project theme focuses on conceptualisations of Future as generated, represented and analysed in Africa and African Diasporas that are of global relevance and interest for systematic and comparative perspectives. For its seventh international Working Group (May to July 2016), the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies invites Fellows who are interested in the social actors producing visions of the future and in sharing their views with each other and with researchers based in the Academy itself. The aim of this Working Group is to review pertinent debates over a wide range of disciplines and to provide an opportunity for innovative encounters between them. We will look at the relations between Future visions, their protagonists and their societal contexts. This shall be combined with a close rethinking of current research in the five Sub-projects of the Bayreuth Academy from this particular angle.

Visions of “Future” are related to specific life situations, discourses and historic situations within which the protagonists of those projected Futures are situated. By “projected futures” we want to express four connotations: First, Futures are always projections of imagined situations based on a (individual or collective) past and experiences of the present. Second, these Future projections are always imagined by particular persons or groups of actors. Third, these Futures are not just abstract considerations but they contain and are based upon normative preferences. Fourth, Future visions include a particular individual or societal project to be realized in that future. This project may be guided by a positive vision for the future based on ideas of a good life, or a good society. Or the Future vision represents a dystopian understanding of the future and the implied project aims at preventing the imagined disaster.

Future visions are the products of certain actors embedded in specific social, economic and historical conditions from which they emerge and within which they are formulated. The Working Group shall focus on those particular actors and their

situatedness. Of course, actors can be collectives (such as social movements, parties or religious groups) as well as individuals (activists, intellectuals, politicians, professionals or youths, to mention only a few). Referring to Tamara Hareven's concept of distinguishing individual, family and societal time, we are concerned with individual, family and societal futures, and their entanglements in the perspective of concrete actors.

Against this background we ask:

- Who are the actors that express visions of the future?
- Whom do they claim to represent: e.g. themselves as a particular group, the "nation", race, gender, generation etc?
- What is their take on a good life, or their understanding of a good society?
- What elements of life or of a good society are prioritized in their vision, e.g. economic, social, cultural (often linked with moral norms), ecological?
- In what format are the visions presented (prognoses, political programs, prophecies, fictional writing, art works or just in everyday practice, etc.)?
- What kind of action do they propose? Do they act?
- How do the perceptions of the international and global developments affect the visions of the future?"

A series of Thursday Sessions shall bring together the results of all Sub-projects in the Bayreuth Academy with the Workgroup's on actors and the societal embeddedness of their visions of 'future'. The topics for the session will be developed in cooperation with the Sub-projects. Following points might be considered:

For instance, the history of changing visions of the Future is closely interwoven with the respective society and the most relevant protagonists of visions of the future. This implies certain ideas about how to live in the future in contrast to current life worlds. Besides, visions about nature (and culture) and the practices related to nature have been formulated by certain protagonists and from the specific background of a society. Diasporas are societal spaces with a strong influence on Future visions that reach beyond national or even regional frames, more than ever in the era of the World Wide Web. Yet, diasporas consist of individuals with different ideas of their lives and their futures – e.g. when it comes to the relation with their society of residence or the society of their origin, respectively. When talking about (the ideas and images of) revolutions the importance of actors is evident. They are embedded in specific power relations, distinctions of social class, gender relations and discourses. These contexts are connected to certain cultural surroundings which produce different iconographies and corresponding ideas of the future.

As part of this Working Group, there will be an international conference "Actors and their Futures". It focuses on the topic of "Future as social project(s)", either seen as collective or individual projects (Lebensentwürfe). This international conference follows closely the overall concept of the working group and is open to all members of the academy and its guests.

All scholars wishing to contribute – senior or junior, domestic or international – are invited to submit an application for a Fellowship in the Working Group for a period of

normally one month, between May and July 2016. Innovative encounters are envisaged between debates that are often confined to individual disciplines, such as History, Philosophy, Anthropology, Geo-Sciences, Physics, Religious Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, Linguistics, Art Studies, and others. These encounters and discussions are expected to materialize in a series of academic and public events and publications during the Working Group period. They will advise and stimulate new research questions or projects on the topic in the Bayreuth Academy. Our debates may also inspire new collaborations and projects in Bayreuth or elsewhere.

Guest Fellows are resident in Bayreuth during their fellowship. They share the building of the Bayreuth Academy with its own researchers. Their stay offers opportunities of exchange not only with the Members of the Bayreuth Academy but also with other scholars at the University and of participation in other academic and public events. Fellows participate in the regular Working Group Sessions and the Workshops if they fall into their period of presence. Depending on the employment status of successful applicants, Guest Fellowships are granted either with a salary or with a per diem allowance, plus travel costs.

Applications should be submitted **until October 31st**, 2015 to bayreuth.academy@uni-bayreuth.de and be accompanied by a CV and a brief statement to which particular debates, protagonists and contexts of visions of the future the applicant proposes to contribute, and under which regional, disciplinary, or practical angles.