

**Biografica. “Collecting, analysing and producing biographies”
Methodological Training in Social Sciences in East Africa 2016 with a focus on biographies.
Fort Portal, Uganda, October 24 - November 3, 2016**

1 Summary

This proposal is inspired by previous East African methodological schools in social sciences, which have taken place since 2005 at the initiative of East African institutional collaborations, spearheaded by the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA, Nairobi) and the Institute of Research for Development (IRD, France). Previous schools were organised in Kenya and Tanzania, it is now Uganda’s turn to host the regional event.

2 Background

In recent years, biographical approaches have become increasingly popular in historical and sociological studies and their strengths and weaknesses are widely debated. Even though these approaches are deemed particularly relevant to the multidisciplinary requirements of African studies, there has been little attempt to directly associate them with particular academic disciplines. In explaining the significance of these approaches within the context of African studies, we note that the field of African studies has known numerous debates surrounding the use of oral life histories, through which it can contribute to wider discussions on biographical approaches. In response to questions about the analysis of relations between the individual and society, the biographical approach helps discerning the different social worlds on the micro, meso and macro levels, within which people are enclosed and between which they navigate. Making it possible to link individual and social spheres, intimacies and public spheres, biographical approaches seem particularly useful for understanding the social and political transformations seen throughout the continent.

It is this theme of biographical-methodological perspectives, therefore, that was selected for the fourth East African methodological school promoting research grounded in fieldwork. The three previous methodological graduate schools were successful, and were seen by East African participants as significant moments in their burgeoning academic career. In this respect, the school recognizes the need for methodological training in social sciences putting both qualitative and quantitative methods in perspective. More specifically, the Centre for Population and Applied Statistics (CPAS, Makerere University) and the Centre for African Development Studies (MMU) in Uganda have both shown interest in qualitative methodology training. The latter hosts an ambitious project on the documentation of local histories (supported by the University of Michigan and the Cooperative Africana Materials Project of the Centre for Research Libraries). The centre seeks to compile a corpus of biographies in order to complement existing archives with individual narratives regarding local history. The town of Fort Portal and its environment is particularly suitable for the training fieldwork exercise on the chosen theme of “the worlds of development”. Relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the central power, the town and its region is rich in agricultural cooperatives, communication media, and NGOs of various kinds which will be targeted during the training. Written sources, interviews, spatial mapping etc. will

contribute towards the production of both personal and institutional biographies (prosopography). The school will offer a panorama of biographical perspectives and tools borrowed from various disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, geography, demography, political science), while reflecting on their articulation and application. These disciplinary perspectives will be supported by a direct engagement through a collaborative research exercise. The school participants will include MA and PhD students from East African universities, as well as lecturers and researchers both from Europe and East Africa. A few French PhD students will also be included to ensure international peer networking. In total, there will be 36 other participants, including 12 senior researchers and 24 junior ones.

With the present proposal, we hope to uphold and boost the multinational collaborative effort of the school. Building on former collaborations, which include ties spanning over more than twenty years in East Africa (with Nairobi and Kenyatta Universities, Nairobi, State university of Zanzibar, Makerere University) we will seize the opportunity to bring in valuable input stemming from recent and prospective research.

3 Objectives

The upcoming school will reinforce methodological skills among participants while widening the network of researchers employing biographical tools in East Africa. The event will offer an opportunity to exchange and learn about the uses of biographical tools by various disciplines: geography, demography, history, political science, anthropology, etc. Participants both junior and senior will benefit from this interdisciplinary exchange, which will be accompanied by tutorials in the use of technological research tools (voice recorders to allow for recording, transcription and coding using CAQDAS, and GPS trackers for geographical interpretations and mapping of life histories) directly put into practice during collaborative field exercises. Moreover, the school's emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches will invite methodological and epistemological reflections on the use of biographies and the construction (or invention) of individual and social identities, mainly in the context of the field exercise: What are the challenges in making people speak of themselves within the context of strict social control? How to balance between individual narratives and systematization of data? How to combine institutional sources (or lack thereof) with life histories?

The event will thus put at the heart of academic perspectives an empirical approach grounded in practice, that goes beyond normative frameworks in general, and simplistic views on 'development' in particular. We will draw, within the context of "Africanist" research, on debates surrounding biographical research, making use of older relevant debates (e.g. oral histories, relations between individual and society) in order to enrich general reflections on the uses of biographies. Beyond the specifics of biographies, the event will allow for the acquisition of other methodological competences in social sciences. Building on a great richness of field-based research, we will intertwine theory with practice by encouraging intense exchanges and debates on different biographical approaches while demonstrating the direct application of these methods. At the same time, the school will be equally useful for informal exchanges, hence the strengthening of ties, between researchers, which may favour discussions on further collaborations in the future. Indeed, we wish that these joint reflections and work would lead participants to establish solid academic networks, building on current projects (e.g. the dictionary of social movements in Africa) while eventually leading to new scholarly initiatives. Indeed, the main objective of the event will be the sharing of knowledge, with special awareness of the needs

of early career East African

colleagues, but also between more established lecturers. Overall, our objectives will be to impart knowledge, make fieldwork-based research more attractive, and facilitate interaction between researchers from different social sciences disciplines within the East African academic context, where first-hand data collection is sometimes neglected and often delegated to untrained assistants.

4 Participation and planned activities

Participants will be selected following a call for applications and their ability to highlight the relevance of the training for their research, sent through IFRA's mailing list as well as through individual contacts of members of the various collaborating European and East African institutions. The thematic school will combine: (1) methodological lecture-hall seminars, and (2) training in the field. A module focused on the local context will articulate both.

In the hall, sessions will involve all participants and start with a half-day introduction on research methodologies in social sciences, then move on to discuss the main debates surrounding biographical/prosopographical approaches. Each participant's individual project will also be briefly presented. This will then be followed by six half-day sessions on the uses of biographies: tools and methods, and will include three parts:

- The first part will consider the uses, within the social sciences, of biographical methods: What is the added value of this approach? What are its variations (individual biography, prosopography, institutional biography...)?
- The second part will focus on different disciplinary uses of biographies and tools: (1) history, ethnography, sociology: interviews and observations from a biographical perspective (2) demography, geography: systematized life histories, spatial analysis and biographical trajectories.
- The third part will concentrate on the close analysis of methods and findings, in order to reconstruct the process stemming from the research idea, through data collection, to analysis and eventually to theorization.

Fieldwork also comprises six half-day sessions. In the field, 'in situ' training will allow us to put to work the entirety of methods put forth in class, through a collective exercise entitled "the worlds of development in Fort Portal: biographical approaches". The exercise will explore different professional, political, social and religious spheres which are involved in 'development' in the region. The biographical analyses (already tested elsewhere by some of the organizers using a similar theme), will permit to trace individual trajectories within these fragmented spheres and to understand those transversal links which allow access to resources, diffusion of knowledge, and political support. The fieldwork training will concentrate on five key types of method:

- Ethnographic or in-depth interviews
- Systematic life histories
- Observation
- Archival research
- Spatial analysis.

Teams will engage in all five methods during periods dedicated to fieldwork. Each sequence of data collection will be recorded and lead to a discussion on the use of data, of transcription and their analysis. The aim is to put fieldwork practice at the centre of one's research approach, to frame qualitative fieldwork approaches and to shed light on the specific interests and diversity of biographical approaches.

6 Expected results

Beyond the learning objectives and networking discussed above, as well as their role in capacity building, the school will have several concrete results. Above all, it will offer an opportunity to explore and develop new international research ties with the hope of expanding East African collaborations towards renewed initiatives.

In addition to the above, the school will offer an opportunity for committed participants to participate as contributors to the Dictionary of Mobilization in Africa. This dictionary is part of a wider online effort to collect and publicize biographies of activists, in Europe and elsewhere. The team leading the school has created the “African” section of the dictionary through the involvement of researchers from all around the continent.

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