

# Historicity: The Primacy of Contexts, Connections, and Networks – The Case of the International Project “African Ivories in the Atlantic World”

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## Introduction

The point of departure of the discussion we make in this contribution is two key concepts proposed by the hosts of the International Conference *African Studies – Multiple and Relational* (University of Bayreuth, December 7-10, 2017), *multiplicity*, and *relationality*, previously developed as an epistemological proposal by the article of Eva Spies and Rüdiger Seesemann, as *plurality* and *relationality*. As the title of the latter suggests, the issue was to discuss the new directions of African Studies as a response to the tendency to subsume Area Studies ‘under the umbrella of Global Studies’ (Spies and Seesemann 2016: 134). We argue that the way time and historical frame have been devalued in African Studies is also part of the problem. Hence, *historicity* should also be considered as a key concept, complementary to *multiplicity* and *relationality*.

History has been one of the pillars of African Studies since the foundation of this interdisciplinary Area study. However, in recent years, this status of history within the field is not so clear. Is it a general trend or a regional specificity? We examine two contrasting examples: the programs of the two major meetings on African Studies organized in Europe and the United States. We start with ECAS, the European Conference on African Studies, biennially organized by the network Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS). When we look at the program of the two last conferences (held in Paris in 2015 and Basel in 2017) of 235 (ECAS6, 2015) and 204 (ECAS7, 2017) panels, 34 and 23 respectively were related to history, cultural heritage or archives. This means history only made up 14.4 percent and 11.2 percent of the program (Figure 1).

On the other hand, if we turn to the provisional program of last November meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA), we get a divergent picture. History, with 57 panels, was the second-most represented disciplinary section of the conference, after policy, politics, and international relations with 59 panels and followed by: women, gender, and sexuality with 25; music, performance, and visual culture, with 21; political economy and economics and religion and spirituality, both with 16; popular culture and media with 15 and finally, anthropology with 13 (Figure 2). However, due to the different criteria in the organization of the program, we can add some 43 panels related to history or including papers dealing with history. Thus, we have around 100 panels in some way connected with African history, corresponding to 45 percent of the whole program (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>

However, this does not seem to have been a deliberate choice. There must exist deeper reasons which may explain this kind of trend (i.e., to take an overwhelmingly ‘presentist’ approach) among scholars who study Africa. This trend is reflected even further when looking at the kind of history preferred by the scholars in these two conferences, which is, again, not a homogenous picture. In fact, if we just look at the choices of time period covered in ECAS panels, this can be seen very clearly. In

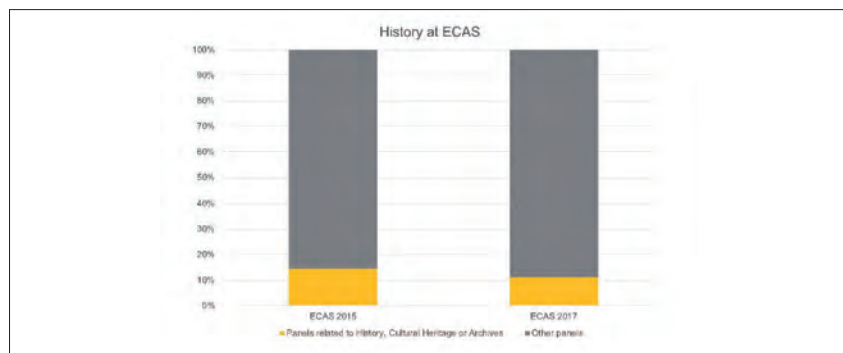


Figure 1: History at the European Conference on African Studies 2015 and 2017; data taken from ECAS 2015

<sup>1</sup> We are aware that we might get a different picture of the relevance of disciplines if we knew the disciplinary affiliations of panelists at ASA and at ECAS. Nevertheless, being an important indicator of analysis, disciplinary affiliation is less relevant than theoretical trends, methodological perspectives, and prevailing subjects within African Studies. There are no disciplinary fields immune to the ‘sin’ of presentism, history included.

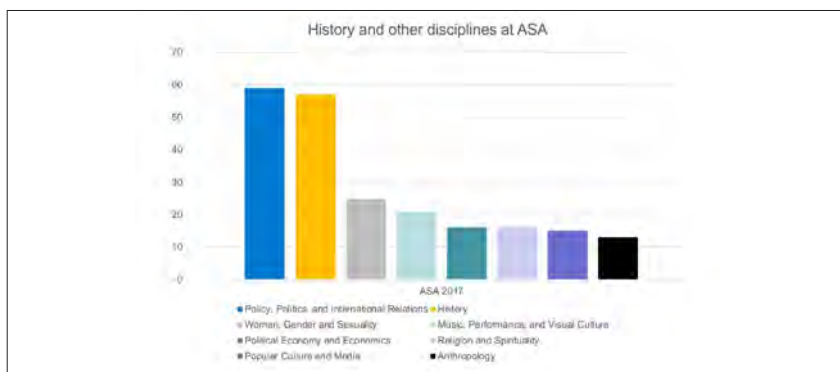


Figure 2: History and other disciplines at the African Studies Association 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting 2017; original data available at Moorman and Wing 2017

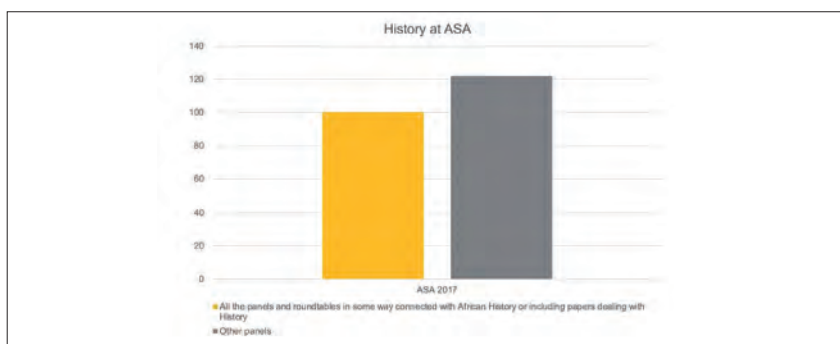


Figure 3: History at the African Studies Association 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting 2017; original data available at Moorman and Wing 2017

ECS6 (2015), only seven of the 34 history-related panels cover any time period or sequence span that precedes the ‘colonial’ 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, of the other 27 panels, only six deal with the ‘early’ history of Africa. In ECAS7 (2017), among 23 panels we only can find two papers covering anything before the 19<sup>th</sup> century and only the panel we were co-chairs of explicitly mentioned an earlier time period. The great majority of panels were concerned with the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 4). In regards to ASA, we have a somewhat different picture, which nonetheless fits into the overall trend discussed so far. From 57 panels labelled as ‘History’ or the set of 100 panels we may broadly define as historical ones, there are only seven panels with a pre-colonial chronology. In the remaining 93 panels, we can only find 13 papers with a chronology earlier than the ‘colonial’ 19<sup>th</sup>

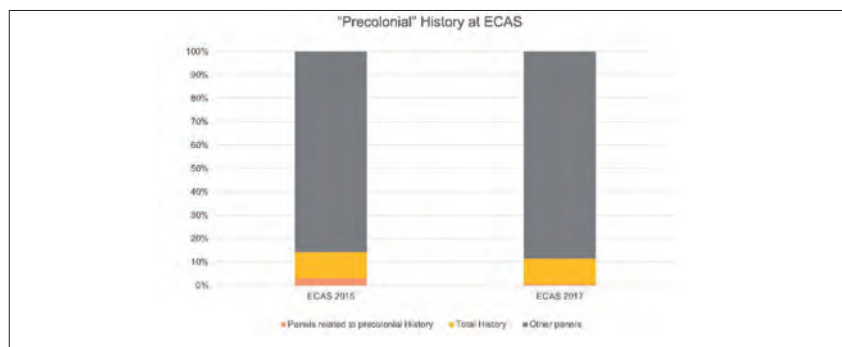


Figure 4: 'Precolonial' History at the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) 2015 and 2017; original data available at ECAS 2015

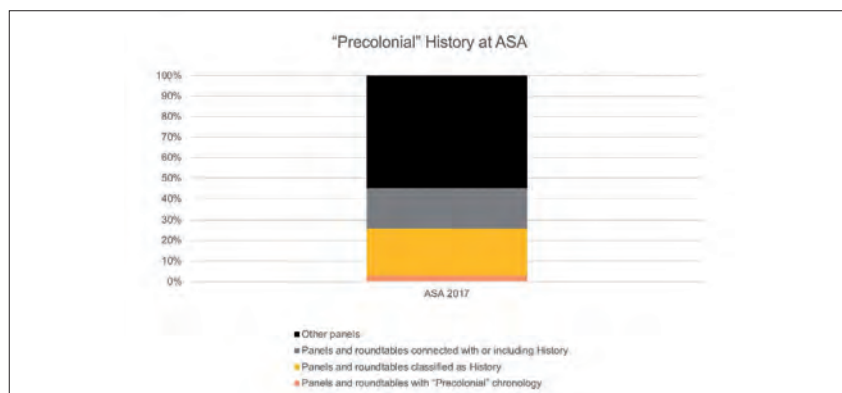


Figure 5: 'Precolonial' History at the African Studies Association 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting 2017; original data available at Moorman and Wing 2017

century or with a subject undoubtedly 'precolonial'; the overwhelming majority concerns the last century (Figure 5).

This is not a total surprise. Some scholars, such as Richard Reid, have already identified this tendency to marginalize the 'precolonial', early history of Africa, in favour of a presentist approach, dealing with African contemporary challenges (Reid 2011). His and our perception should not be seen as a corporate criticism of the underrepresentation of 'precolonial' themes, but rather as a wake-up call in regards to the methodological and theoretical risks of an approach focused on the short-term and on the so-called 'challenges of the present.' As a matter of fact, a number of these challenges, such as economic development, political authority,

urbanism, environment, violence, warfare, and ethnicity, all of them the target of recurrent theoretical discussions, could be more thoroughly debated if the early past contexts and *longue durée* tendencies were considered (Reid 2011: 138; see also Diawara, Lategan and Rüsen 2010).

It is in a long-term perspective, and with comparison with past situations, that one can evaluate the contemporary transformations in Africa and the extent of changes within the dynamics of continuity.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, *historicity* is indispensable to surpass the problems currently facing African Studies, namely the above-mentioned danger of being subsumed as an Area Study field within Global Studies. Discussion of African history has been crucial to identify the flaws of globalization theories. As Frederick Cooper warns: “The imagery of globalization derives from the World Wide Web, the idea that the web-like connectivity of every side to every other side represents a model for all forms of global communication” (Cooper 2001: 206-7). In truth, the mainstream approach of Global Studies is teleological: the connectivity in all directions would be a path of no return, with a resulting inevitable expansion of the integration processes at a planetary scale. This would imply the dilution not only of spaces, but of all sorts of boundaries, and political as well as religious links. This is a Global Studies trap, we would add, that African Studies should not become entangled in. History puts these supposedly general and irreversible movements in perspective, showing that, frequently, what is linked today had already been linked in the past and became separated only at a later point. Thus, in the past, there were contradictory widening and closing processes. Cooper shows, for instance, that colonialization was not a globalization process which ‘fell down’ on the African continent; on the contrary, it was a process of spatial, political, and economic disarticulation, focused on metropole logics of ruling. “The problem with making integration the standard – and measuring everything else as lack, failure, or distortion – is that one fails to ask what

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<sup>2</sup> “XI Congresso Ibérico de Estudos Africanos. Trânsitos Africanos no Mundo Global: História e memórias, Heranças e Inovações” (11th Iberian Congress in African Studies. Africa on the Move in Global World: History and Memories, Legacies and Innovations), which will be held in Lisbon, at the University of Lisbon, organized by the CH-ULisboa (Centre for History of the University of Lisbon) and CESA (Centre for African, Asian, and Latin American Studies), from 2-4 July 2020, intends to trigger approaches to the major challenges of Africa in the world, giving a core place to a historical perspective, which will include early history. For more information, see Centro de História da Universidade Lisboa (2018).

is actually happening in Africa” (Cooper 2001: 206). In fact, Africa is far from being subsumed in a global totalizing process. As a matter of fact, it “is filled with areas where international investors do not go, even where there are minerals that would repay investors’ efforts” (Cooper 2001: 206-7). The right path would be to study connections without (necessarily, as we would add) thinking within the criticized global framework.

The study of African History has contributed substantially to the field of World History (Manning 2013: 329). The historical perspective of Africa has widened the horizon of a non-Eurocentric (or ‘totalizing’) World History and other derivative labelling, such as ‘global,’ ‘connected,’ ‘entangled histories,’ Atlantic as a part of a ‘global history,’ etc. Similarly, as African History and African Studies cannot turn their backs on world/global dimensions, even without a globalization rough perspective, they should continue, as Patrick Manning warns us, to pay attention to principles which are common to World History (Manning 2013). The first of these ‘world-historical principles,’ according to him, would be to “trace links and parallels among African regions,” searching for “distinctions, linkages and commonalities” (Spies and Seesemann 2016: 134-135). Here the question emerges whether it is better to research regions, or whether the focus should be put on rigid entities / units, as has been discussed by Spies and Seeseman (Spies and Seesemann 2016). But maybe we need these territorial references to understand actual relationality. The second principle is complementary with the first and reflects these world dimensions: “trace connections [of Africa] in all directions’ non-African regions, oceans and continents, and African diasporas” (Manning 2013: 329).

This way of thinking about World History has a lot in common with the approach of *multiplicity* and *relationality*. Within the field of African History, these concepts have already been implicitly integrated into historiographical debates. African Studies can benefit from strengthening *historicity* in its agenda precisely because *African History* has been confronted with these issues as a discipline. This does not mean that these issues have been totally solved. The discipline is, and should be, more deeply engaged in multiplicity and relationality approaches. We acknowledge that, in order to achieve it, we need more theoretical discussion on the somewhat artificial way historians frequently use entities and other rigid units as the key players of connections, relations, or entangled processes. This is clearly an issue to be addressed in the future.

Nevertheless, *historicity* is a way of countering perspectives centred on rigid or essentialized units or entities, as well as to reconstitute world/global dynamics which cannot be reduced simply to parts of a global, totalizing process. Thus, a global focus should start from Africa/African *lifeworlds* (Spies and Seesemann 2016) as loci of observation, beginning with a historicization of contexts, events, concrete life experiences. We need this methodological path to identify the different scales of connection, of web-like relations within Africa, its diasporas, or elsewhere. This approach is crucial in making a dynamic interpretation of the subsequent processes of blending and overlapping.

The international project *African Ivories in the Atlantic World* illustrates this perspective. It is based at the Centre for History of the University of Lisbon in association with Portuguese and Brazilian universities. It includes scholars from the University of Lisbon, the University of Évora in Portugal, and the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil in a three-year study of African ivories and of ivory trade. The project is the first comprehensive study of 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century African ivories extant in Portuguese and Brazilian (from the state of Minas Gerais) collections. It is also the pioneer attempt to achieve a reconstitution of the ivory trading networks in the Atlantic world. Within the project, the axis Portugal-Brazil is not simply a link between two imperial spaces or a mirror of two national histories. In fact, the research scale is almost global, encompassing both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds connections. Nevertheless, the latter are just focal points of an Atlantic scale history whose core is made up of multiple African settings.

In extant literature, the Atlantic ivory trade has been almost forgotten or neglected, being subsumed under the general picture of the Atlantic slave trade mainstream research.<sup>3</sup> However, full evidence for an intense

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<sup>3</sup> Previous evidence and scarce research about ivory as a commodity in Atlantic Africa and the evolved European empires networks was summed up by Feinberg and Johnson (1982), more than four decades and a half ago. Supplementary evidence and trade figures were added by the authors on the Dutch West India Company and the Royal African Company imports. The historiography of ivory trade on Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean World offers a different scenario. Two examples of comprehensive works are Alpers (1975) and Sheriff (1987). A synthesis on the early history of the Afro-Asian trade in ivory can be found in Pearson (2005). Nevertheless, Portuguese archival sources have been overlooked, as well as the links of this trade with Brazil in the contributions published in English. The project *African Ivories in the Atlantic World* is working to fill this historiographical gap (Antunes 2017).

circulation of raw ivory is found in primary sources. Ivory is often one of the most important merchandises, just after enslaved people, along the Western and West Central African exports from the 16<sup>th</sup> to, at least, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the chronological limit of the *African Ivories* project.<sup>4</sup> Ivory has not yet been the target of a specific inquiry other than as a counterpoint to slave transportation. The recent contributions of the *African Ivories* project and associated scholarship strive to follow the opposite direction.<sup>5</sup> For the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a chronology of undeniably high rate trans-Atlantic slave exports, the project has uncovered apparently strong ivory trade flows and associated merchant contracts (Luís 2016; Correa 2017; Alves 2018). Preliminary figures of ivory circulation between West Central African ports such as Cabinda, Luanda, and Benguela, and Brazilian and Portuguese destinations (namely, Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon) balance the assumption of an almost exclusive relevance of slave trade Atlantic connections.

Nevertheless, the African contexts which are the pillars of the above-mentioned Atlantic connections remain to be addressed. A study is still to be done about the local contexts of the ivory trade beginning with hunting and/or gathering and the way tusks are commodified. Namely, how ivory became a commodity within the African worlds far away from the early long-distance trade routes, such as the Sahelian and the Eastern African ones. What were the meanings connected with these activities and how did ivory relate to ideas and practices of power? We need a political economy which considers the ivory cycle: men and elephant environments, hunting and/or gathering, local uses, flowing internal trade, Atlantic and global circulation. Furthermore, a political economy of ivory implied local multiple religious experiences or, conversely, a local absence of ritualization. Thus, multiple African *lifeworlds* have an explanatory power which reframes the connections with the Atlantic

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<sup>4</sup> Harms 1981 has thoroughly shown the importance of the ivory trade flowing from the Congo basin to the Atlantic coast. Although slave trade is the core of his book, his contribution remains an exception. Miller 1988 still is the milestone for slave trade in West Central Africa with useful insights to the connections with ivory trade.

<sup>5</sup> For these African Atlantic regions, the project *African Ivories* has delivered the first attempts at a focused study of trade in ivory (Luís 2016; Soares 2017b: 59-86; adding to several contributions, such as Malacco 2017 and Malacco 2018, in Santos 2017b and in Santos et.al. 2018).



world and contextualizes the globalization of the African ivory trade.<sup>6</sup> The pattern of *relationality* is featured in multiple contexts and spatial scales which are not bound by regions as the sole references of Atlanticization and globalization.

The perception of hunting and the very physical contact with ivory tusks may be in contrast within the same region. At this stage of project research, our conclusion is that market dynamics in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries did not dramatically change Western Africans' contrasting cosmological perceptions of ivory as raw material as well as carved pieces. European sources show that while in Northern Senegambia, anyone could collect abandoned tusks from deceased elephants (Barreira 1968: 164), that would not be the case in the Sapi cultural area (south of the Guinea Bissau region and mostly down to present-day Republic of Guinea and Sierra Leone), where the carved ivories were mostly produced. While in Northern Senegambia, as might be expected, hunting was a ritualized activity, in the Sapi area, on top of that, only the initiated were allowed to touch ivory tusks in a similar situation (e.g., Álvares c. 1615: fol. 65v). Elephant hunting seems to have been an activity reserved to initiates (probably in societies of power) with 'mystical' competence and special protections, which they used to hunt the animals (e.g., Faro [1664] 1991: 203). It was also deeply connected to symbols of power, in the wider meaning Wyatt MacGaffey (2000) gives to this term (referring to Central Africa). In such conditions, we can suggest that any kind of ritual could make possible the commodification of raw ivory to fulfil the needs of the market.

The project *African Ivories* also identified the absence of African historical contexts in the research of the carved objects in ivory which circulated around the Atlantic basin, eventually encompassing four continents. The literature on African ivories has hitherto focused on the so-called 'Afro-Portuguese ivories' and on Western Africa. Hybridity of motives and shapes was the hallmark of the sculptures which raised scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> In fact, one of the main features of these ivories is the use of iconographic elements pertaining to European visual culture, which they combine with typologies and forms that are typically African (Afonso and Horta [2014] 2013: 79). Whenever the evidence of any Eu-

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<sup>6</sup> For ivory as a global commodity, see Chaiklin 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The *catalogues raisonnés* edited by Ezio Bassani (Bassani/Fagg (1998); Bassani (2000)) remain the most complete surveys of Luso-African ivories.



Figure 6: Fragment of oliphant converted into a powder flask, ca. 1500-1550. Ivory. Length: 25 cm. Sierra Leone. © AR-PAB. (Bassani 2000: 252, cat.779)

ropean model inspiration is absent, at least the ‘Portuguese’ themselves were a recurrent motif. Often, artefacts, and parts of them, were reused in new European and American *lifeworlds* (to Minas Gerais, Santos e Alves 2017).

The research conducted before 2007 followed a formalist methodology, overlooking the context of production. But determining the provenance, material, and dating of African ivories was problematic for scholars who did not read or accurately consider Portuguese sources. These are crucial in making accurate interpretations of the objects’ iconography (Mark 2014, 2015). The traditional concept of ‘Afro-Portuguese’ underestimated these works as African ‘artistic’<sup>8</sup> creations, while exaggerating Portuguese input. It also undervalued West Central African ivories and objects produced earlier than 1800, precisely because no European inspiration is evident. This meant, for instance, that the context of Congolese uses and ceremonial offers of ivories to European authorities remained untold stories until now.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For a critique of the use of the concept ‘African art’ in an early history context of African material culture, see Diawara (1996; 2007; 2009) and Mark (1998).

<sup>9</sup> Within the *African Ivories* team, Mariza C. Soares made a first approach concerning the power meaning of *mpungi*, ivory trumpets ritually used in Congo, documented as early as the 16th century (Soares 2017a); concerning the late 18th century and the early 19th century Kakongo, Ngoyo, and Loango regions, João Gime Luís wrote the first dissertation on trade and insignia in ivory (Luís 2016).



Figure 7: Oliphant, ca. 1490–1520. Ivory. Length: 56.3 cm. Congo.  
© Jorge Welsh Works of Art, Lisbon / London

The modern process of museums labelling their exhibits has for the most part gotten rid of the local, concrete, multidimensional meanings and uses of these objects (Diawara 1996, 2007, 2009). As soon as they were part of private collections, even their provenience began to be lost or confused with other non-Western ‘exotic’ origins. This can be most clearly seen by the tendency to classify West African objects as oriental (Bassani 2000: xxviii). In response to these historiographical and cultural heritage flaws, we start by identifying the diverse contexts of recollection of raw ivory and production of carved objects acknowledging the multiplicity of contexts. We have concluded that confined regions of production, as depicted by art historians, often do not correspond to historical context. The label ‘Sierra Leone’ applied to Luso-African ivories is a case in point. In fact, the setting to be considered is much wider, stretching from northern Senegambia — as concerns ivory gathering and elephant hunting — down to the south of present-day Guinea-Bissau, the northern boundary of the production of carvings which were exported to Europe (Afonso and Horta [2014] 2013: 93, n.6). At the same time, the project has identified other regions of production which were not considered so far (or undervalued), such as, generally speaking, the former Gold Coast or Calabar. Within the Gulf of Guinea, the focus had been a political entity such as Benin, which is not, in fact, a suitable spatial definition (Afonso and Almeida 2017). If ivory objects such as oliphants were insignia of power, the spatiality of their production was not just reduced to the supposed boundaries of a polity. In Greater Senegambia (Barry

1988; Dias and Horta 2007), production seems to be scattered along the rivers and sea ports attracted by the *contact zones* (Pratt 1992) or points of connection of local African communities with the Atlantic world, the same where Luso-African brokers concentrated themselves (Horta 2017b). Another case is the role of oliphants within West Central Africa *lifeworlds*, from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least. Their spatial distribution crosses different polities and power contexts, from the north of river Congo to Kwanza river or farther south (Almeida 2017; Soares 2017a). Hence, the resulting picture for Atlantic Africa is a polycentric, multiple production. Historicity means also to ‘historicize’ geography.

If we refer to the meanings of the carved objects, which eventually were exported, the preliminary assignment to different centres of production enables us to recognize the prominence of local meanings, even in the production for foreign trade. On the one hand, we observe the continuity of decoration patterns; on the other hand, it seems that the introduction of European model-based elements did not change the grammar of ritual meanings of the artefacts, such as oliphants, associated with warfare, funerals, political ceremonies, and various sorts of religious experience (Cavazzi da Montecuccolo 1687: 120, 166; Cadornega 1972: 78;



Figure 8: Toni Malau or Santo António da Boa Sorte, Congo, 17<sup>th</sup> century? Ivory. Museu de Lisboa – Santo António. © Museu de Lisboa – Santo António. (LaGamma 2015:108)



Figure 9: Santo António, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. Wood. Length: 12 cm. Collection Marcia Moura – Museu de Congonhas – Congonhas-Minas Gerais © Ana Panisset 2007

Almeida 2017, Horta 2017a; Malacco 2018). Local African meanings are engraved on the objects, even in those produced in response to European commands. Thus, there is not a clear distinction between the local and the global sphere. Rather, there is a multiplicity of meanings associated with the same objects.

Moreover, the project identified a local production in Brazil related to Central African ivory pieces which was a transatlantic missing link. Ideas could survive beyond the materiality of sculptures. In the American context, namely in Minas Gerais, Brazil, we hardly find any African ivories. The local contexts are not reproduced in the Diaspora. Ivory arrives from Central Africa to Brazil as a prized commodity and the access of Africans to it as a raw material to sculpture is limited (Santos and Alves 2017; Paiva 2017; Chaves and Gomes 2018). Nevertheless, there is evidence of a transposition of iconographic models, such as the sculptures of Saint Anthony from Congo, the so-called ‘Toni Malau,’ to different materials, such as wood. And, in wood, they were part of the power experience of African-born or Brazilian-born slaves or freedmen, in small family shrines (Santos 2017a; Paiva 2018; Froner 2018).

Global trade and the circulation of ivory, raw and carved, is a complex multidimensional process. It involved African actors, often Euro-African brokers, as well as African and European consumers. Local and external meanings, generated in specific contexts, mixed together in different power-imbued entanglements which connected Africa with global networks. If we start from African *lifeworlds* as a point of observation and connection, and follow *historicity* as the methodological path, provided that *multiplicity* and *relationality* are also the general precepts of our research, we will not just sit back and watch African Studies being subsumed within Global Studies.

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