

edited by

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AFRICA TODAY

QUESTIONING DIGITALIZATION, GENDER AND HEALTH



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Introduction

Selenia Marabello, Samuel Ntewusu

Since 2013, renewed Italian interest in Africa has produced a number of initiatives involving different economic and cultural sectors as well as conferences: examples include the conference on migration and development in 2023 and, most recently, the Italy-Africa political summit in 2024. The new Italian partnership with several different African countries addresses historical, economic and geo-political connections in which Africa, especially the northern part, is treated as an enlarged Mediterranean Sea. Euro-African relations have been focusing on economic issues such as energy, business development and, in particular, migration control. Indeed, as Gaibazzi and Bellagamba (2017) underline, borders between Europe and Africa are being renegotiated as the European Union externalizes border control and “offshores” the management of migration.

In this complex setting – where multiple Italian governments have considered Africa a strategic partner – several initiatives have paved the way for renewed institutional cooperation at the university level. Such cooperation revolves around a plan for sharing knowledge and teaching among European and African universities in relation to global challenges and “science diplomacy”.

At the end of 2023, the Italian Ministry of Research launched a specific internationalization programme across Italy and the African continent, in the framework of Italy’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). This programme, supported by European Union Next Generation EU funding, was addressed with various strands to the Global South, including South America.

The University of Parma, in partnership with six other Italian universities¹ and thirty-seven African universities and institutions across sixteen countries², submitted the proposal *Academic Collaboration through Higher International Education for a Viable and Equitable Africa with Italy*, acronym ACHIEVE-IT. The project formally began in October 2024 and was completed in May 2026, granting less than two years to organize multiple forms of research mobility and teaching initiatives designed to strengthen long-term academic and scientific cooperation between Italy and African countries. In particular, the project aimed to promote a more equitable and reciprocal partnership model by fostering students and faculty exchanges as well as collaborative research and creating Advanced Skills Programs (ASP), international summer schools, and joint Master's and PhD programs.

Despite the ambitious intentions, project management struggled in pursuing the objectives due to timing issues, increasingly restrictive mobility policies and intense bureaucratization. Nonetheless, by navigating the uncertainty and difficulties of the project, participants were able to consolidate several partnerships and establish others. ACHIEVE -IT has been characterized by interdisciplinarity woven together by some key shared topics such as public health, sustainable agriculture and food security, energy poverty, urban and environmental planning, digital innovation, and social and gender inclusion.

In this plan, the Department of Studies on Language and Culture at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia established a new partnership with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, thereby giving both departments the opportunity for short-term stay abroad. Students from both institutions thus had the chance to study in a different academic environment or embark for the first time on fieldwork with the

¹ University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, University of Ferrara, University of Bologna, University of Salento, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Piacenza campus), and "Mediterranea" University of Reggio Calabria.

² Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, Tanzania, and Tunisia.

intent of gaining practical experience. In the same manner, researchers and scholars also visited partner universities to evaluate the potential for future joint research.

This book, one of the results³ of this incipient cooperation among the Unimore group of anthropologists and the Institute of African Studies⁴, proposes a collection of essays organized into three sections: the first on the digitalization of land and identity, the second on gender relations and feminist anthropology, and the last on HIV stigma and epidemics. The three sections, based on empirical data collected by the authors through their personal research pathways, raise theoretical and methodological questions in anthropology and the social sciences. While focusing on Ghana, they also engage with larger cultural frameworks such as digitalization as land identification (Narh and Doumbia) and citizenship (Cutolo), gendered knowledge and power (Gribaldo, Atobrah and Pellecchia), and disease management at the micro and macro level (Kwansa, Atobrah, and Pellecchia). By intertwining Ghana and Liberia, Ivory Coast as well as Italy and Myanmar, this ethnographic gaze allows readers to consider cultural, economic and historical processes in specific localities and nations through a multi-level perspective.

Across multiple domains – identity systems, land, epidemics, intimate violence, and cancer care – the chapters show how technocratic or moral narratives (efficiency, inclusion, heroism, family-as-safety-net, voice) can flatten social complexity, mask structural drivers, and shift the burden onto those who are already disempowered. The analyses featured in the volume engage with and raise larger questions about how people navigate historical

³ Seminars, podcasts, and videos are available on the website of the Laboratory of Ethnology and Anthropology at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, the entity in charge of supervising overall project dissemination. For more information: <https://www.labetno.unimore.it/achievit/>.

⁴ A collaboration between anthropologists in the Master's in Anthropology and History of the Contemporary World at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and colleagues at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. We wish to express our gratitude to Kojo Amanor and Stefano Boni, two colleagues who have been involved in the project and have given us the concrete opportunity to launch it.

legacy of inequality, new practices of social identity, and growing political resentment at the global level.

Employing ethnography⁵ as a shared research method, the authors' various triangulations and combinations of data reveal how technocracy, social stigma and disease management impact people's daily lives and the relationship between individuals, state institutions, and access to care. From different perspectives (Atobrah and Gribaldo), the chapters explore how important ethical concern and dilemmas around health are for discerning and understanding the debates on anthropology and feminism. At the same time, they offer an opportunity for further and deeper reflections on methodological choices: to recalibrate proximity, listen to the silences of fieldwork, and prioritize subjects and patients. A powerful echo of ethnographic dilemmas involving the politics of care and the state reverberates across the six studies comprising this volume. Although gender is implicit in the first two chapters, gendered tensions and observations run through all the essays analysing how kinship relations and social identities reproduce gender norms and codes. Furthermore, in the last section, gendered relations and structural power asymmetries are analysed in the light of epidemics by examining socio-political determinants and moral economies of kinship as crucial re/producers of social stigma. In this written dialogue between Kwansa and Pellecchia, stigma – explored through social sciences and medical literature – is shifted from the individual to organization level to show how humanitarian interventions mirror, contain, and cope with social stigma in epidemic breakouts.

Social meanings as well as state and public health objectives and policies are presented in relation to the tactics and practices of HIV and infectious disease patients so as to foreground the «politics of care» (Mol 2008). Atobrah analyses care practices

⁵ Some of the methodological reflections were informed by the discussions held in the seminars organized as part of the UNIMORE FAR Department project 2025 PI S. Boni. We thank our colleagues, students, and all participants.

and cultural representations affecting cancer patients, particularly women, by drawing on the Ga social and family scenario of non-communicable disease. As she argues in her chapter, «while family care-giving continues to serve as an essential and foundational support system for cancer patients in Ghana, ethnographic evidence reveals critical imperfections, shortfalls, and ethical ambiguities that challenge the idealized image of the African family as an inherently perfect caregiving institution». Such interventions are usually shaped by multiple factors including inadequate medical facilities, limited medical staff, the practical fact that an individual's illness is often also the concern of the family or kin, and lastly health system governance. Health systems, which should be considered a critical resource for national development, have not received the kind of attention they deserve despite the fact that health and development are intimately linked. This interlinking can be observed in Africa but also several other contexts where economic plans and austerity policies have deeply affected health system and re-organized solidarity nets and the actors of care (Cabot 2016; Douzina-Bakalaki 2021).

Kwansa's article takes kinship, a very classical topic for anthropology in African societies and beyond, and highlights its plasticity (Carsten 2000, 2004) as a way of showing how we might guarantee rights to HIV patients. This ethnography foregrounds relatedness to deconstruct the representation of family as a safety net. In relation to HIV and coping with stigma across borders, there are corresponding interpretations between Kwansa's ethnography and Marabello's work in Italy⁶ with the Ghanaian diaspora. Despite being frequently romanticized, family ties are not necessarily a safe place for the patient: migrant women within transnational family networks often keep silent about their pregnancy and delivery until their newborns have been HIV tested to as to obtain a medical certification of healthy status and lack of mother-to-child viral transmission, thereby

⁶ One of the authors, Selenia Marabello.

practicing what can be defined a «21-month pregnancy» (Marabello & Parisi 2018, p. 121).

Extending the analysis of the social dimension of the body and groups to different research foci, Cutolo as well as Narh and Doumbia delve more deeply into digitalization as both these essays navigate the notion of citizenship: the citizen body and citizens' property. Worldwide developments in biometrics and digitalization are not only a lucrative global affair but also a key conceptualization of individuals and property in contemporary neoliberal societies. While Cutolo demonstrates how the relationship between individual body and social identity is remoulded, Narh and Doumbia extend research into the way land digitalization is reconceptualizing social ties and people's link with the land and environment. In as far as land digitalization is considered a critical way of ensuring access, this process entails equally deep-seated challenges in Ghana as well. Apart from the technical difficulties, social and ethnic groups have voiced alarm at this trend and indicated their unpreparedness for digitalization. They are specifically concerned because a similar policy stance adopted in the past served to trigger current conflicts, including several conflicts around land that seem to have been generated in part by earlier forms of documentation in some parts of Ghana.

Chapters ethnographically investigate global issues in Ghana and Ivory Coast to understand how local social contexts and people navigate and react to digital economy initiatives and policies, how they appropriate and define ideas of the self and property, and how new individual identities are moulded by state and supra-national organizations such as the World Bank. Biometrics is considered an effective tool for monitoring and regulating migration flows as well as an efficient way to allocate resources, in both cases related to capital and mobility. While these identification strategies and technologies are currently appearing in digital forms, their roots can be re-traced to a genealogy of institutional surveillance and control beginning in the colonial period. Following this line of reasoning, Banégas and Cutolo

(2025) argue that Africa, today as much as during colonial times, is a sort of experimental laboratory for new personal identification technologies. As such, it represents a good object for thinking about how technological infrastructures impact social relations, social identity, and local areas.

In this sense, contemporary Africa has the power to shed light on other contexts and global processes⁷.

It is not a new idea that, except for scholars doing research, travelling and living in Africa, the Western gaze has long orientalized this continent (Said 1978) and invented it (Mudimbe 2007) as the primitive “Other”. Reverberations of such orientalization sometimes also be felt in international and interdisciplinary projects such as the one just concluded – they appear almost in the backbones of the project (management constraints and rules on participating universities, etc). This concise volume is the outcome of collaboration. Within the short lifetime of the project, participants sought to gain an understanding of critical issues by more or less “throwing a stone” in the river of knowledge and thereby questioning land, gender, health, and social changes so as to shed light on contemporary neoliberal societies.

Can African history and anthropology generate an innovative perspective on the political frictions emerging in the neoliberal era? How can the Global South’s feminism and decolonial understanding of cultural dynamics contribute to the emancipation of imaginaries, politics and knowledge? How and why are knowledge infrastructures, knowledge transmission, and institutions such as universities embroiled in contemporary public debates? These questions serve as a road map for anthropologists and researchers to interrogate current and future political and social plans and their effects on the ground.

⁷ This was the main topic of the international conference *Africa as context, Africa as method* held at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia on 21 May 2026, organized by an international scientific committee. We wish to thank the entire scientific committee and all the speakers for sharing their questions and research data. In alphabetical order: K. Ampofo, J. F. Bayart, A. Cutolo, F. Declich, K. Pallaver, C. Pennacini, P. Schirripa, C. Tornimbeni, and V. Fusari.

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