Call for Participation

in a working group

Communities of Practice Revisited

We are looking for participants for our working group of the Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple" based at the University of Bayreuth, Germany.

Topic: Communities of Practice Revisited

Goal: joint publication (an edited volume or a special issue)

Programme: four hybrid workshops, where we can discuss our work in progress and the draft contributions, between October 2022 and February 2023; it is possible to participate online or to come to Bayreuth

How to apply: send a short abstract (max 300 words) outlining your prospective contribution to Valerie Nur (valerie.nur@uni-bayreuth.de) and Alžběta Šváblová (alzbeta.svablova@uni-bayreuth.de). Deadline for abstracts is **31st October 2022.**

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) was coined almost three decades ago by Etienne Wenger (1998) as a social theory of learning. Since then, it has been used in a number of contexts and disciplines – from ethnographic studies on apprenticeship, education, management, to development, peacebuilding and humanitarianism. The main claim of this conceptual framework is to see learning as a process of social participation, closely connected to notions of community, identity, meaning-making, and practice (Wenger 1998: 4-5). Wenger argues, that learning is so crucial for the social order that theorizing about the former is "tantamount to theorizing about the other" (Wenger 1998: 15).

CoP can be defined as a group of individuals, tied together by a shared practice and concern. The learning process includes, among other factors, a socialisation element, where newcomers to the community are gradually included and acquire knowledge through participation. The process of integration is conceptualized as a move from a periphery to the core, e.g., from an apprentice to a master.

Practices define the community but are in progress, they are continuously designed, redesigned, tested, modified and developed further by its members. Furthermore, CoPs account for a relational making of meaning and identity.

Wenger explicitly avoids a binary comprehension of the world. For him, the implicit and embodied are not peculiar to the individual as opposed to society. Instead, implicit and embodied knowledges are experiences which members share in a common practice (Wenger

1998: 47). The concept emphasizes fluid boundaries, and the possibility of non-exclusive, temporary and intermittent membership.

Using the potential of a non-binary relational approach, we want to think the concept further and elaborate on the aspects of power, territoriality and the boundaries of the community.

Contributions may address following themes:

Power

Despite the analytical qualities of the concept, an important variable is being omitted: the question of power. Power hierarchies are an integral part of the social order on all levels. Communities are not an exception in this regard. Even the vocabulary Wenger uses (labels of "core" and "periphery" of a community) carry a certain normative, power-infused meaning (cf. Wallerstein 1974, or Frank 1966). We would like to take up this loose end of the concept and engage with it critically, by adding power to the analytical categories the concept pays attention to.

Entanglements and boundaries

One of the strengths of the concept is that it does not imply categories such as gender, class, race, religion. CoP are defined by a shared practice that brings and binds its members together, however, their boundaries are fluid and as such, can be differentiated and defined only interpretatively (Sondarjee 2020: 5). CoP can (and do) transcend multiple boundaries – organisational, national, and others. At the same time, boundaries and margins are an important place, where collective learning happens (Sondarjee 2020).

We plan to shed light on the diverse entanglement of CoP with other communities, individuals, and institutions. How do these interrelations act on the community, its members, its practices and meanings? How can we conceptualize communities whose practices have an impact beyond the boundaries of their own community? Here, questions about power become relevant again. Moreover, if membership is defined solely by practice, the question arises who and what remains unseen.

Spatialities

The original concept does not discuss aspects of territoriality. Yet valuable analytical insights could be gained from the question of whether and how CoP localize in space. Members of a CoP may meet daily in an open-plan office, as in Wenger's empirical example, and exchange, align, and share practices across desks and during breaks. However, CoP may span space or exist virtually only. We want to think about the cohesion of CoP, how they relate to each other and position themselves under aspects of space and territoriality.

We look for participants who want to

• use and assess the concept of CoP critically, paying particular attention to the issues of power, territoriality, and boundaries

• drawing on the interdisciplinary debates and using empirical examples from Africa and beyond, refine and update the concept

• contribute to the current debates on reconfiguration of African studies and its methodology

Equally, the group will explore possible synergies with theories that relate to and could enrich reflections of and re/conceptualizations of the CoP, linking it to narrative theory with its non-

normative focus on the central medium of interrelated and relational production, conservation and transformation of knowledge, identity and meaning. Theories of collective/social and cultural memory might also provide an interesting point of reference for discussing or extending the theory on communities of practice and the herewith connected contextual and relational processes of knowledge production and agency.