The question of the production, circulation and transformation of knowledge about Africa was the focus of a GEI workshop from 18th to 19th May, 2015. As Simone Lässig explained in her welcoming statement, we were on this occasion not inquiring as to the knowledge of Africa to be found in the textbooks of different nations, epochs or subject areas; rather, we were more generally investigating how this knowledge was dealt with. The guiding principle for the workshop was the assumption that knowledge is not a one-way street from science into the textbook (or other media), but rather that it circulates beyond the boundaries of scholarly discipline, institutions, society, politics or culture. It was on the basis of this idea that we decided not to restrict the scope of the workshop to one medium – the textbook – but rather to investigate the circulation of knowledge within various fields. To this end, we agreed on two areas of focus.

The first was on the individuals and institutions that play an active role in this process, given that knowledge only circulates via active participation by the diverse parties involved in its production, circulation and transformation. The school and the textbook play a particularly important part here, as do museums, universities, media companies and scholars, for example. Our thematic focus was on knowledge of Africa. We were not assuming here that there is any fixed or “correct” knowledge of Africa, but rather that which knowledge should be associated with Africa has repeatedly been redefined in diverse contexts and over the course of time. As Daniel Speich-Chassé emphasised in his keynote lecture, it is also a question of what has been known about Africa when and by whom, and particularly of the forms of knowledge that emerge.

Monika Albrecht, Hubertus Büschel, Andreas Eckert and Ute Schneider provided initial comments that introduced and fuelled the ensuing discussion. In the following, I will abstain from providing a traditional conference report, but rather give a brief outline of the conclusions for textbook-related research that arose from this more general perspective on the subject.

The event began with a panel on literature. Ninja Steinbach-Hüther based her contribution on the observation that knowledge – despite growing international networks – is highly unequally distributed. She supported this statement with a statistical study of African academic literature in German publications from 1960 onwards. As textbooks are often criticised for a lack of source material and perspectives, typically from Africa, the question of the availability of knowledge is particularly interesting in this context. Marcus Otto then inquired in his paper as to the effect of “epistemic actors” such as the Annales School with its histoire des civilisations on textbook knowledge in France. Otto placed his focus on decolonisation and the discursive figure of négri-tude. He thus convincingly argued that the knowledge conveyed at a specific point was shaped not only by aspects of availability, but also by the way in which it was incorporated into certain discourses.

The second panel focused on development policy. Both papers inquired as to which knowledge is considered relevant in which contexts. Samuel Misteli described the development of the IPED in Dakar, a training institute for experts on African development since the 1960s, also touching on the aspect of the Africanisation of development organisations. Lars Müller then inquired as to which individuals and institutions were active in the production of textbooks in West Germany between the 1960s and 1980s, and which knowledge of Africa and development was supposed to be conveyed. In both cases, the question as to who was considered the authority for certain thematic
areas and thus authorised to speak for certain groups, was also of central importance. The third panel focused on the medium of film. Felix Rauh used two case studies to demonstrate that the dissemination of knowledge in documentary film works particularly well whenever certain individuals and institutions are visible in confirming the film’s authority during its advertisement and broadcasting. Particularly important in this regard, he confirmed, are the aspects of availability and supplementary media. Anne Bruch presented her study of English informative films after the Second World War, focusing on the Colonial Film Unit and debates on how to produce the most authentic image of Africa possible. The films that were produced directly after the War already showed signs of the first changes in this respect; however, there was only a truly visible shift when a new party, the genuinely African Film Units, were established in the early 1950s. While both documentary films as well as informative films provided other possibilities for knowledge transfer than textbooks, both papers convincingly demonstrated the virtue of investigating which media have been produced for which target market, with consideration of both the participants and the context of the debate.

The fourth panel focused on the field of scholarship. Each of three papers addressed knowledge production within the context of, respectively, a research institute, a network and a conference. In his paper, Stefan Esselborn analysed specifically the Africanisation of African Studies as a research field, using the example of the International African Institute. Esselborn showed that the IAI is a particularly illustrative example with which to investigate structures of knowledge production by describing how the Institute’s funding was shifted from London into the USA during the period of decolonialisation. Louise Schellenberg studied a network of German-African scholars of German Studies who have had a key influence on knowledge of Germany in Africa and knowledge of Africa in Germany. Using selected biographies she convincingly showed which material and non-material resources have been mobilised in order to develop new concepts of Africa. Steffi Marung investigated international congresses of Africa experts from the 1960s and 1970s. These presented transnational arenas in which participants could communicate across the borders of East and West, or South and West, in turn shaping considerably the content and form of knowledge. Discussions of content were thus linked with the various relevant individuals and institutions, rendering visible the repercussions on the respective home countries of the participants. The panel thus demonstrated that the respective structure and contexts in which these various parties operated also had a considerable influence on the contents of the knowledge they transported.

The workshop was extremely fruitful for the project “Knowledge of Africa. Discourse and Practice of Textbook Development in Germany and England (1945-1995)”, funded by the German Research Association (DFG). While the project concentrates on the circulation of knowledge between the textbook, textbook production and societal debate, our workshop provided the opportunity to learn more about the circulation of knowledge of Africa in other areas and to exchange views on the roles of specific individuals and institutions. For textbook-related research as a whole, the workshop showed how beneficial it can be to place the discussion of textbook knowledge within a broader context, rather than treating textbooks in isolation.

ENDNOTES

1 This is being written by Jennifer Gräger (Bremen) and will soon be available on H-Soz-Kult.