

# EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

## Vaccine Nationalism and the Future of Research in Africa

The ravages of COVID-19 tested everyone across the globe during 2020, exposing the stark divisions within and between countries. Where I sit, in South Africa, the arrival of the pandemic led to the wealthy scrambling to self-isolate, subscribing to streaming services, and transitioning to remote work. In contrast, significant numbers of South Africans did not have the financial means to physically distance nor the kinds of employment that could simply be moved to their residences. As in the United States, we have seen unemployment levels rise, hospitals bursting at the seams, and our universities trying to manage the move to online teaching. Near the end of 2020, a glimmer of hope emerged in the form of vaccines. These very vaccines, however, have generated new tensions between countries and raise complicated moral situations for those who produce research about the continent.

“Vaccine nationalism” is a term that has quickly entered our vocabularies. In December, when the first COVID-19 vaccine was administered in the UK, here in South Africa it was not clear if anyone would be able to receive a vaccine in the first half of 2021. Luckily, our government, through multilateral mechanisms such as Covax and the African Union, in addition to bilateral negotiations with vaccine producers, has managed to subsequently procure a substantial number of doses. The first vaccinations for front line health workers were rolled out starting in mid-February 2021. In January 2021, the Economist Intelligence Unit projected that South Africa would achieve sufficient vaccine coverage by mid-2022—it would, however, be the only African country to do so. The rest of the continent is only expected to achieve sufficient coverage between late 2022 and early 2023. The pandemic will continue to run its course for at least a full year longer on the continent than is projected in the United States and Europe, and the consequences of this discrepancy reproduce a sense of citizenship discrimination, global structural inequality, and exploitation.

---

*African Studies Review*, Volume 64, Number 1 (March 2021), pp. 1–4

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association  
doi:10.1017/asr.2021.12

Put bluntly, despite the fact that many in the United States and Europe are themselves facing difficulties accessing vaccines, writing from a country where we will have to wait—even if that wait will be much shorter than for everyone else on the African continent—it is difficult not to perceive the massive preorders of vaccines by countries of the “Global North” as an act of hoarding. This has not only elicited frustration and bitterness, but it has also stirred up recent and more distant histories of medical inequalities and abuses of Africans. The refusal of the U.S., Canada, the EU, and the UK to support a proposal from South Africa and India for a waiver of the WTO TRIPS provisions, which would allow for quicker and cheaper access to COVID-19 vaccines, haunts those with memories of similar battles that took place in the 1990s over HIV/AIDS medications. Thousands died due to the unaffordability of treatment in African countries until agreements were reached for a TRIPS waiver. In the face of a global pandemic, we have watched in disbelief as it seems that wealthy countries have again chosen profit over lives. Equally haunting, however, are the histories of African populations being used for medical interventions without receiving clear benefits, or in some cases any benefits at all. A common discourse that has arisen to justify the massive discrepancy in vaccine access between wealthy and poorer countries has been that the significant funding of the vaccine initiative by wealthy countries is what enabled various vaccines to reach the market in record time. This discourse, however, ignores the fact that thousands of people around the globe took part in trials without which no vaccine could have been produced. Where we lacked finance, we offered our bodies and research infrastructures. The result has been the disbelief many have felt when this contribution has been ignored, and bodies have been injected and monitored, with no promise or it seems even consideration of equal access.

This inequality in access will pose significant moral quandaries for those who study the continent but are based in the U.S., the UK, and Europe. While you begin to be able to travel and start planning research trips for 2022, how will you manage your relationships with colleagues, friends, and other interlocutors on the continent who will still be caught up in the everyday displacements of the pandemic? Will this experience become a catchy ethnographic opening for your next book or article, or will you substantively grapple with what it means that you are crossing borders, socializing with multiple people (even if still wearing a mask), and sitting in an indoor venue without concern while others are still hoping to visit their grandparents safely? What will an ASA 2022 be like if, in addition to the usual visa challenges, Africans are potentially hindered from easily traveling because of their lack of access to vaccines? In sum, what will it mean to conduct research in the continent and produce work about the continent, given the inequalities between countries that the pandemic has exacerbated? COVID-19 has shaken us all; the promise of a solution provides not only hope, but also a challenge to imagine what solidarity looks like in an age of vaccine nationalism.

Claudia Gastrow  
Associate Editor  
*University of Johannesburg*

This first issue of 2021 is brimming with exciting new scholarship from all of Africa's contours. We are thrilled to feature two new critical interventions in African studies scholarship. The first is a forum reflecting on the provocative 2016 Abiola Lecture by Achille Mbembe [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6p8pUU\\_VH0&t=10s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6p8pUU_VH0&t=10s)], edited by Sasha Newell and Katrien Pype. In an introductory essay [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.88>], the collaborators introduce the forum, which contains contributions by Victoria Bernal, Peter Bloom, Peter Geschiere, Aghi Bahi, and the editors themselves. The second critical intervention marks the opening excursion of the new African Studies Keywords (ASK) essay series. In my introduction to this series [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.10>], co-authored with Gaurav Desai, we outline the logics, antecedents, and recent history of this project. This volume features work on COVID-19, and essays on Angola, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal.

In the first of our ASK essays, "The Body," [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.101>] Julie Livingston observes the centrality of the human body to the African studies scholarly endeavor. The body grounds the reader and researcher alike, providing a foundation for understanding political, social, religious, and symbolic life and systems. Livingston brings diverse and divergent strands of scholarship, from childbirth to illness and disease, into a conversation about the relationship between our scholarly field and notions of corporeality.

In a nice complement to the editorial immediately above by Associate Editor Claudia Gastrow, the issue continues with Amy Patterson and Emmanuel Balogun's essay "African Responses to COVID-19: The Reckoning of Agency?" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.122>]. The authors explore the various responses of African states and the leadership of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, explaining that sometimes inharmonious national responses reflect expertise, pan-African solidarity, and competition.

Next, in a pair of articles about Nigeria, Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo and Daniel Agbibo explore different dimensions of national and regional conflict. Onwuzuruigbo's "Enclaves of Banditry: Ungoverned Forest Spaces and Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria," [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.46>] reveals how parts of northern Nigeria are increasingly ungovernable, as cattle rustling gangs and other criminal elements capitalize on poor forest management.

In "The Precariousness of Protection: Civilian Defense Groups Countering Boko Haram in Northeastern Nigeria," [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.47>] Agbibo investigates the counterinsurgent vigilantism operations of the Civilian Joint Task Force. Vigilantes and civil militias play an increasingly collaborative role in military operations, but their rise also speaks to the precarity bequeathed by repeated government failure to control the Boko Haram insurgency.

In "Colonial Education and Women's Political Behavior in Ghana and Senegal," [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.12>] Erin A. Hern compares the

anti-colonial activism of women's groups and ties her explanation for divergence to the legacy of colonial education. In Senegal, girls' access to education was significantly curtailed by gendered and domestic expectations. By contrast, in the Gold Coast, a variety of educational pathways opened opportunities for women to participate in anti-colonial nationalist activities.

Finally, in "A nossa lâmpada não se apaga': The Mnemonic Return of Angola's Jonas Savimbi," [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.23>] Vasco Martins draws our attention to a curiously disturbing phenomenon. In Angola, the violent legacy of Savimbi is getting a make-over via new technology, including video games. Viewed within the broader context of a national reevaluation of the liberation war, Martins contrasts the characterizations of hero and villain as they feature within the contemporary political struggle.

We conclude this issue with a book review essay about the performance and practices of Black Atlantic Christianity by Adam Mohr [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.98>], an interview by Tunde Onikoyi with filmmaker Tunde Kelani [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.86>], and a range of book and film review essays.

Benjamin N. Lawrance   
*University of Arizona*