



African Contributions to Global Health

Video Transcript

A history of neglect, silencing and rediscovery

TANJA: We are at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, a centre of documentation and expertise on Namibia and southern Africa, located in Basel, Switzerland.

The institution comprises an archive, a specialist library and a publishing house, in addition to offering scholarly, cultural and socio-political events and it celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year.

This is a very special place for me as it is the space that sparked my interest in African history. In this video, Doris and I will tell you what led us to explore African contributions to global health.

I'm Swiss and I grew up in the countryside about an hour's drive from Basel. At high school I learned about Apartheid in South Africa and segregation in North America. In history and English classes, Africans occurred as victims of oppression. Studying English and History in Switzerland and England, I learned much about colonialism, yet the protagonists remained white men, which I found frustrating. I felt the urge to dig deeper into the history that I had never been taught. Fortunately, I was lucky to find myself in Basel, which has a lot to offer when it comes to the documentation of African history and culture, as this very place emphasises. Focusing on the history of science and medicine I wondered why Africans were regularly described as go-betweens, intermediaries and auxiliaries -- rather than as scientists, doctors, and intellectuals. While we are currently learning more and more, these African contributors to health development have until recently attracted very little scholarly attention. Colonialism and the need to make Africans appear backwards to legitimise colonial rule have played a huge role in this.

DORIS: I was born in Ghana but was raised in the United States. During my university education in the US, I wanted to become a medical doctor because of my experiences of witnessing relatives die from preventable deaths in hospitals. However, during my fourth year at university, a course I took on global health introduced me to the world of global health and the public health issues plaguing the continent of Africa. This course shifted my career path to public health and led me to spend my year after university in Ghana. I worked under one of the first female oncologists in the country who has dedicated her life to breast cancer education and awareness among women in villages and cities in the country. After this experience in Ghana, I went on to do my Masters in Public Health, with specialisation in Global Health.



Reflecting back now, all my formal education has been in the United States learning about the contributions of various organisations and persons in the West to global health in Africa.

However, in my own field experience in various African countries, it has been African medical doctors, public health scientists and epidemiologists working on the ground who have taught me so much about this field. So many African public health scientists are working in remote areas and places across the continent, yet they are never heard of. This has left me wondering: Do medical interventions, policies, or treatments only count as "global health" if someone from the West comes to the African continent to work on them -- rather than African medical experts working among their own communities? From my own personal experience, I know this not to be true. African scientists have had so much influence on their continent and the rest of the world in shaping the field of global health.

There are signs that African health professionals are slowly becoming more visible in global health. We see this, for instance, in the World Health Organization's first African general director. In 2017, the Ethiopian biologist, immunologist and politician Doctor Tedros was elected.

TANJA: What are your experiences with African contributions to global health? Why are you interested in learning more about them and how have you become interested in this topic in the first place?