

Welcome Speech for the Symposium ‘Frontiers of African Studies’

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you very much for participating in today’s international symposium, ‘Frontiers of African Studies’. In particular, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to our distinguished guest speakers who have come a long way from Africa, and to the prominent Japanese Africanists who will be serving as commentators at this meeting. Please allow me to say a few words on this memorable occasion.

This is a ‘kick-off’ symposium commemorating the establishment of the African Studies Center at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, the ASC–TUFS. The ASC just opened in April of this year, but this university has a long history of African studies. In 1964, the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa was established here and has actively carried out basic research on Africa’s languages, cultures and history since then. Later, in 2012, an Africa course was launched in the School of International and Area Studies. Dozen of students specialising in African studies graduate from this school every year. The establishment of the African Studies Center further strengthens the role of this university as an important centre of African studies in Japan.

The ASC was created against the background of a rising Africa. The region has seen significant economic growth since the mid-1990s. In fact, its total GDP has almost doubled in two decades. The influence of African countries in world politics has been also rapidly growing. Africa is certain to play a critical role in tackling global environmental problems.

In this context, the importance of African studies cannot be exaggerated. An in-depth understanding of Africa is indispensable in building a close and constructive relationship with the countries in the region.

The objective of establishing the ASC is twofold. One is to enhance research on the problems that Africa is currently facing, and the other is to strengthen Japan’s academic network with Africa.

Our university has accumulated considerable research on basic problems related to African languages, cultures, and history. Working from this basic research, the ASC will be focusing on current topics in Africa including economic development, conflict resolution, and environmental protection. In this symposium, to which we have invited eminent scholars of African studies, young researchers belonging to the ASC will be presenting their papers. I believe that this is an excellent opportunity for them to work with world-class scholars and thereby further develop their research capabilities. Conducting high-quality research is our top priority.

Another important role of the ASC is to forge an extensive network of Africanists. Africa is a vast continent with 54 countries, almost a fourth of all countries in the world. It is imperative for the ASC to develop relationships with researchers in these countries. As the host of this event, I will be greatly pleased if you take this opportunity to foster close ties with your fellow academics in the international community.

The ASC–TUFS is a very young institution, born just six months ago. It is quite small, particularly in contrast to the largeness of the many and diverse problems that currently beset Africa. Your assistance and guidance will be indispensable for the ASC researchers as they set about to find solutions. I ask for your support, cooperation, and advice to this new-born research centre. It is my fervent hope that the ASC will grow someday to be one of the most important centres for African studies in the world.

With the participation of the eminent scholars who are our guests, the discussion of this symposium is certain to be extremely fruitful. I believe this event marks not only the launching of the ASC, but also that of a new and exciting era of African studies in Japan.

Thank you very much.