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Graduate Students: Our Professions and Places in African Studies

Discussions about this issue began in 1999 between graduate students of UCLA and of MSU participating in the Summer Cooperative African Language Institute (SCALI). Working together, Alhaji Maina Gimba, the Hausa instructor at SCALI, Carmela Garritano, and Shobana Shankar, then Editor of *Ufahamu*, prepared the way for a cross-regional graduate student collaboration. This volume represents the joint work of the conference organizers, the journal's editorial board, and all of the presenters and participants who came together at Michigan State University in support of Africanist scholarship and students. We are delighted that this issue of *Ufahamu* contains the important contributions of emerging scholars from a variety of fields and working across the continent.

The primary mission of this journal has always been to encourage communication, with collaboration as one possibility, between Africanists of different orientation. While the journal strives to bridge the physical distance and ideological differences separating members of our inter-continental community, another, often disregarded issue crosscuts Africanist studies: namely, divisions of labor. These divisions occur in the context of many relationships relating to gender, profession (i.e., academic and non-academic), and economy.

The preparation of this conference volume has raised many questions about the work and responsibilities of graduate students. We began to consider the expectations of Africans studying and working in the US as well as the many foreign student researchers seeking to affiliate with universities in African countries and conduct research. As a community, we hold a particular position in the academy, but personal circumstances and relationships play a large part in how we work on a daily basis.

Graduate students studying Africa across the United States and abroad have a variety of ways in which they contribute to the dialogue on the content and focus of African studies more generally. Beyond our studies in our home universities, many of us are also involved in graduate student journals, conference panels, and campus organizations devoted to the various aspects of African studies. In all of this work, it is important to consider our commonalities and differences and to question our place in the larger academic community. In keeping with *Ufahamu's* tradition of query and dialogue, the journal would like to raise, as the starting point of what will hopefully become an ongoing discussion, the possibility and potential of a cross-campus Africanist graduate student association. While the model of the American or Canadian African Studies Association might be ambitious at this point, the interests of such an organization could be to determine the topics of panels specifically for us or to share experiences of organizing regional and campus

conferences. An informal meeting of graduate students at an annual conference may be a simple way to begin. For example, we propose that there is a need for consideration of the role of graduate students in the annual conferences of the most important professional association in African Studies, the ASA.

The idea here is not to add more work but to consider the value of the work we are doing. By and large, we do not yet have much power in making decisions related to funding, hiring, and curriculum. We often find that the context of our study has changed, particularly from those in which our professors worked, sometimes in the constraints and challenges to our studying at our home institutions as well as our work abroad. Additionally, the topics of inquiry and the pressing issues in Africa have shifted, and graduate students want to be part of determining the research agenda in African studies. As editors of *Ufahamu*, we want to highlight what we see as a need for dialogue among Africanist graduate students and encourage the start of a discussion on these issues. We invite graduate students to meet with their cohorts and contact us via email or mail with thoughts and suggestions about our contributions to the Africanist community.

Shobana Shankar & Lahra Smith