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Authors

Lydon, Ghislaine
Carmichael, Tim

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Graduate Conferences and Scholarship in African Studies: The Mid-Western Tradition

Guest Editorial

The field of African studies has grown tremendously over the last forty years, especially in the United States. For several decades universities here produce more Ph.D.s in African Studies than in any other country in the world. One result is that the annual (U.S.) African Studies Association (ASA) conference, long the staple gathering for many Africanists, has become so huge that one barely has the time to attend panels and catch up with friends, let alone meet faculty and student scholars from other universities. As attendees scurry around to this or that panel or meeting, the best conversations often end up taking place between regional specialists, disciplinary cohorts, or those who subscribe to common theoretical schools. Owing to the scale of the annual meeting and the variety of discourses, it can be difficult for graduate students to assess developments in other fields or to identify broad priorities in African Studies.

It is perhaps only natural, therefore, that graduate students have begun organizing forums in which they can engage in more intimate conversations about Africa across the disciplines. Of course, this kind of initiative is not new to Africanists in North America, for whom originality and creative entrepreneurship is required in crafting funding proposals, doing research in Africa, and publishing in a highly competitive climate. Still, it is inspiring to see the development of potentially enduring graduate student institutions across the United States. On the East coast, graduate students at Boston University are in their fifth year of organizing an annual conference in African Studies. On the West coast, UCLA students, whose predecessors pioneered this journal, also host a yearly African studies meeting. In the Midwest an annual conference traveling between universities has now also entered its fifth year. At these venues, students are able to present term papers, research proposals, thesis chapters or other work in progress. It is therefore exciting to see this issue of *Ufahamu*, a thirty-year West Coast graduate journal, publishing a selection of the papers presented at the Fourth Annual Midwest Graduate Conference in African Studies (MGCAS), which was attended by students from around the United States in the fall of 1999.

Northwestern University students initiated the first annual MGCAS. The chairperson, Gregory Mann (now Assistant Professor at University of California), explained:

The idea came out of some discussions with Jane Guyer in which we realized that although we were near the geographic epicenter of a series of very strong African studies programs, we did not know much about what our graduate colleagues were doing in

those other research centers....It seemed a waste to have such a concentration of institutions with so little conversation between them, especially at the junior level.

Along with Mann, the other main organizers that year (1995) were Clinton Nichols, Neils Teunis and Jenna Johnson-Kuhn.

The event evoked such enthusiasm that University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign students, under the leadership of Nicholas Cook, decided to host the conference for a second year. As Mann recalls: "Suddenly, this little idea had become a real conference, and the turn-out was impressive, as was the quality of the work presented." The other conference organizers at UIUC included Tunde Brimah, Maimouna Barro, Frida Domatob, and Consolata Kabonesa. Incidentally, the second conference was more than three times the size of the first and students presented a total seventy-five papers emanating from a wide array of Midwestern, Eastern and Southern universities. The topics they addressed included agricultural production and marketing; the law in historical perspective; African and international media representations; arts and identity; and various aspects of women's lives past and present.

As one of the oldest U.S. institutions specializing in African Studies, the University of Wisconsin-Madison was a natural choice to host the next conference. It was organized by Jeremy Liebowitz and Mike Williams, as well as seven other graduate students: Stephen Corradini, Akosua Darkwah, Sean Hanretta, Mustafa Mirzeller, Kim Rapp, Andrea Robles and Kristen Velyvis. The Third annual MGSAS was held over a weekend in February-March of 1998 and was attended by sixty-one presenters, among whom were the conference's first participants from Howard University and the University of California system. Also, the organizers succeeded in involving Africans from the wider Madison community in participating in and attending the conference.

The following year, no one initially volunteered to sponsor the following conference. At that point, Jeremy Prestholdt, who attended the second conference and heard great things about the third, contacted Tim Carmichael, and suggested that Michigan State University take the lead in organizing the fourth conference. Carmichael took the lead and invited Ghislaine Lydon and Manelisi Genge to co-organize the event. They were joined by Amadou Fofana, Carmela Garritano, Loyiso Jita, Kimberly Ludwig, Trish Redeker-Hepner, Will Shields, and Tumie Thiba. For organizational reasons, it was decided that the conference would take place in the fall instead of the spring. Forty-four students presented papers on themes ranging from environmental, ecological and health issues; discourses on education and development; religious practice and sexuality; as well as identity and historical representation.

The challenges for graduate students organizing a professional conference are myriad. From our experience in organizing the Fourth MGCAS,

we found that operational logistics and fundraising required constant teamwork, commitment and cooperation between the organizers. Fortunately, we benefited tremendously from the trail-blazing efforts, encouragement and input of our predecessors. In the area of fundraising, the Committee for Institutional Cooperation, a consortium of about twenty Midwest universities, has provided financial assistance for travel scholarships since the conference's genesis at Northwestern. We found that CIC's formal recognition and support was a major asset in our own on-campus fundraising campaign. Moreover, the CIC travel funds facilitated attendance by CIC-institution students, freeing up money to defray rooming costs. The continued relationship between MGCAS and CIC suggests that if similar multi-institution organizations exist in other regions they should be targeted early on by future conference organizers.

So far, however, it has proven difficult to bring Africa-based Africans to participate in the conference. For the Fourth MGCAS gathering, there was a Senegalese student who wished to attend and who succeeded in obtaining a visa to come to the U.S. Unfortunately, however, we could not raise enough money to cover a portion of his travel expenses. In another instance, a Nigerian student managed to secure funding to come, but his efforts were stalled when he tried to obtain a visa. He was unable to get an appointment at the U.S. Embassy; and this despite his repeated efforts and numerous faxes and e-mails that we and MSU Nigerian professors sent in hopes of expediting the process. One week after the conference concluded he received a letter setting up an appointment for the following month to discuss his request! Based on this experience, and those of other African Studies event organizers, we believe that in the future U.S. consular policies will likely pose as many difficulties as raising funding for African participants. Yet when African graduate students or faculty are refused visas—or are not given interview appointments quickly enough to allow them to attend international scholarly meetings—we all suffer and the increasing marginalization of Africa-based scholars is exacerbated.

In looking back at the popularity and attendance of these graduate events across the nation, the high demand for such gatherings is clear. To present ideas in a generally collegial and professional atmosphere; to meet fellow junior scholars and to discuss various concerns, theories, methodologies, fieldwork experiences; and to visit other African Studies centers to meet key faculty who attend conference panels, are invaluable opportunities for graduate student. Organizing and participating in these types of conferences stands to become an integral part of academic socialization. It is gratifying for us to see the earnest sharing of ideas, advice and constructive criticism that takes place in these forums. The cross-disciplinary spirit of intellectual solidarity emerging from such graduate student encounters often stands in sharp contrast to the naturally competitive but occasionally hostile environment that characterizes academe, African Studies included.

Although intellectual rivalry in any field is natural and potentially

constructive, in recent years we have witnessed published expressions of personal animosity that have nothing to do with Africa, Africans or African Studies. It is disturbing to see prestigious journals in African Studies give their stamp of approval to overtly personal attacks in supposedly scholarly reviews. The same is true for books and articles where scholars vehicle their personal vendettas against each other. In such an academic climate, it is inspiring to see graduate students all over North America striving to build their connections and opportunities to present their own work in a friendly and supportive, yet constructively analytical, atmosphere. Ideally, students will build on relationships established during these conferences to plan future collaborations and partnerships in their graduate and post-graduate careers.

We see this issue of *Ufahamu* as a tribute to graduate students' engagement in forging professional networks through conference organizing and cooperation in publishing. These papers represent the national and international character of such efforts, and the results are appropriately diverse in terms of topic, period, geography and approach. They also provide good reading.

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In a fascinating article that combines textual interpretation with an original approach to multiple cultural layering in the area of education, Jennifer Hays takes a hard look at methodology and development discourse analysis among and about the San in Botswana. She first considers relevant literature on anthropological methodology and (Critical Language Studies) discourse analysis, namely works by Arturo Escobar and Norman Fairclough. The theoretical stance she adopts seeks to demystify the construction of knowledge about the field of "development" by recognizing that development thought is constructed within a global power structure and vis-à-vis internalized perceptions about under- and over-development. Yet, as Hays points out, if one takes linguistic dimensions into serious consideration then the picture becomes increasingly complex, especially in cases where local cultures are subjugated to linguistic hegemony.

So called 'hunter-gatherers' such as the San in Botswana face some of the toughest challenges for self-representation and cultural rights of any indigenous peoples of the world. The San are increasingly marginalized within Botswana, Hays explains, because of a general climate of linguistic and cultural irritation—expressed in classrooms—that contributes strongly to high dropout and failure rates among San children. To illustrate the situation, Hays examines a forum published in *The Botswana Gazette*, one of the country's most widely read newspapers, in which both San students and government schoolteachers vented their frustrations. The reportage sought to explain the roots and dynamics of a seemingly unfathomable cross-cultural dilemma. Through a sensitive discursive, inter-textual analysis, Hays unpeels various levels of the conscious and/or unconscious prejudices of reporters, teachers and students alike. She categorizes the complaints articulated by San children and their non-San school teachers, and documents, through an

examination of the use of language and terminology, misrepresentations that characterize discussion of and about the San, as published in the daily paper. Hays concludes by laying out the fundamental issues confronting the future social, political and economic welfare of the San, specifically in regard to their access to education, and thereby to the types of information that might better enable them to defend their rights as a people.

Moving from the south-central African region of Botswana to the Horn of Africa, from education and the right to self-representation to another topic related to Africans and 'modernity,' Worku Nida examines rural-urban migration among the Gurage of Ethiopia. Known in Amharic as *fanonet*, the tradition of urban migration is well established among the Gurage and goes back to the late nineteenth century. Worku begins by questioning the literature on urban migration from the Wirthian model of the 1930s to the more recent work of Janet Abu-Lughod, to show why and how further empirical scholarship on the Gurage and their internal migrations in Ethiopia is necessary.

Worku dates the beginning of "modern urbanization" in Ethiopia to the establishment of Addis Ababa in the 1880s. He argues that Ethiopia's urban landscape was significantly altered by the short-lived Fascist Italian occupation (1935/6-1941). During it, property rights were redefined and a wage-labor market, that hitherto had not existed, emerged. Defining urbanization as 'the development of modern towns and/or cities,' Worku goes on to describe the role played in this process by the Gurage of south-central Ethiopia and to argue that it was in direct reaction to external political pressure. Based on extensive fieldwork and an original methodology that successfully marries the tools of the social anthropologist and the historian, Worku dives into the past to determine the beginnings of the practice of *fanonet*. He finds that as a result of external provocation, many Gurage men and women transformed from tribute paying farmers to wage-earning construction workers building roads and various edifices. It was this shift that inaugurated the Gurage *fanonet* tradition.

Using a combination of oral history and interviews, as well as linguistic analysis of professional and technical terms, Worku provides a rich window into Gurage labor and migration history. Based on his findings, he challenges the dominant view that the origins of *fanonet* lie in the tribute system imposed by Menelik II, something that provoked a cash need among the Gurage villagers (and many others). He demonstrates that tribute then paid in standard measures of local cereal (*tef*) had cash value and could be paid directly. Moreover, the Gurage farmers and laborers organized themselves in regional work pools, a system that in effect represented communal non-wage labor. Worku thus shows that the first Gurage urban migrants were employed as *corvée* laborers in Menelik's army. From this initial migration would spring a much larger movement that only became full-fledged *fanonet* in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The next article, by Jeremy Cyrier, takes us to the Congo forests in the early twentieth century to consider the *Anioto*, or closed association of

leopard men among the Bali. His historical research touches upon a gripping issue affecting present-day African (and other) nations: the use of violence and terror to oppose change. Cyrier is aware that his particular subject of inquiry might appear controversial, but he is quick to dismiss the *Anioto* male association as "barbaric." Based on a close reading of the Belgian archival record, he examines a series of disturbing murders apparently committed by the *Anioto* of the eastern uplands of the then Belgian Congo. Cyrier argues that the *Anioto*, a Bali institution of social control and protection that predates the European occupation of the region by at least two hundred years, became especially active in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The reinvigorated movement was then reacting directly to institutional and other pressures exerted by the new power structure imposed by the Belgian administration and Christian missionaries.

Cyrier recounts oral traditions describing two versions of the origins of *Anioto*, both of which, interestingly enough, concur that the leopard association was created as a result of an imbroglio between a man and a woman in which the latter was the key player. From the iron-rich forests of eastern Congo, the association endeavored to defend villagers against outside intrusions. It also functioned as a tool for social control through terror tactics, namely select murders that were disguised as leopard attacks by gashing the victims with metal claws, mutilating and sometimes decapitating them, and then strewing their dismembered bodies in the forest. Not only did this type of activity frighten nearby forest dwellers and villagers, it also placed the Belgians on alert, as Cyrier documents based on the very rich paper trail left in the colonial archives. Court proceedings, interrogations, and depositions; all these means were used by colonial authorities desperate to police the *Anioto*. Ultimately, the Belgian crackdown succeeded in destroying the leopard association, but as Cyrier is first to admit, much of the history of this particular institution remains shrouded in mystery.

In the Horn of Africa, and also addressing the subject of identity, Tricia Redeker Hepner reflects upon the creation of an Eritrean nation from the point of view of its ethnic representations. At the heart of her thoughtful article are questions about the re-creation of national boundaries that have cut across ethnic lines in the context of contemporary African geo-political warfare and struggles for real or imagined sovereignty. The case examined by Redeker Hepner is that of the Tigrayan people (Tigrayans of Ethiopia and Tigrinya Eritreans) who, as a result of the recent semi-formal recognition of an international boundary dividing Eritrea and Ethiopia, have been split between two competing and ultimately confrontational nations. Within this context of demarcation, she critically examines Eritrea's nationalistic vision and contributes to an understanding of 'the reification and politicization of ethnicity' in the context of the creation of a new nation.

Choosing to tailor the terminology of ethnicity and nationalism to the specific regional context of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Redeker Hepner purposefully distances her study from the mainstream Horn literature. In

examining national discourses and ideas about federalism within constantly changing, multiethnic territorial entities, she discards the static notion of easily definable ethnic markers in very different contexts. In thinking about the Tigrayans/Tigrinyas, the Oromos and other ethnic groups without clear frontiers in the Horn of Africa, we are reminded once again of Hays' article and the rights of the San to self-representation and self-determination.

A bit further south on the East African coast, Katherine Angela Luongo tackles the controversial subject of clitoridectomy in colonial Kenya. In a thought-provoking article, Luongo explains how the female body was the nexus of competing claims to the Kenyan state, by colonial administrators, church officials and freedom fighters. She begins with a discussion of the historical "hysterization" of the female body in European discourse, and the consequent importation of such notions to 1920s Kenya. Luongo further argues that both European colonizers and Kikuyu men sought to exercise control over Kikuyu women's sexuality and reproductive functions. The British administration's stance was tied to its longer-term purposes of social control and maximizing colonial economic production. European missionaries also sought to eradicate the practice of female circumcision among the Kikuyu. Luongo retraces the history of land alienation and the creation of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) to show how the subject of female circumcision was adopted by the KCA's political platform and then proclaimed a symbol of Kikuyu national identity.

While the KCA, with Jomo Kenyatta at its head, defended the practice of circumcision of young girls, European missionaries in Kenya took the opposite stance, fueling what became known as the "clitoridectomy controversy." Coached in arguments about a colonial "civilizing mission," the missionaries pressured the colonial administration into passing legislation to "protect" Kikuyu women from this harmful practice. As the colonial state became involved in the regulation of African women's bodies, the controversy was introduced into British parliamentary debates by feminist MPs who sought to raise awareness in support of the eradication of female circumcision amongst the Kikuyu. Luongo concludes that while it was widely debated both in Kenya and back in Britain, the clitoridectomy controversy remained a debate about African women in which they, the actors, had no say.

Also in East Africa, Yvonne Teh discusses the museum industry in and out of Africa, with a particular focus on mainland Tanzania and the island of Zanzibar, where she did her research. With a creative pen and a refreshingly broadminded perspective, Teh argues against the scholarly grain that these institutions in Africa were, even in the aftermath of European occupation, intended for the consumption of Westerners and not Africans. Yet, even if museums in Africa were established for and by European adventurers and entrepreneurs, and even if in some ways they remain alien institutions of voyeurism and art mining or otherwise living vestiges of bygone colonial days, today some Africans are trying to change museum priorities.

Teh examines with candid clarity how the European museum legacy

has become a ground of cultural contestation in several late twentieth century African countries. She explains that after acquiring independence several nations, including Morocco and Zimbabwe, almost discarded museums altogether. Others, however, promoted museum creation, and this policy has extended far and wide, even to 'remote' locales. This latter development, Teh suggests, can be attributed not so much to the growing numbers of tourists visiting Africa, but rather to a national demand for museums. From interviews in Tanzania and Zambia, she argues that Africans are eager to reform and/or reinvent the foreign museum implant to fit African realities. One of Teh's most interesting suggestions is that African museums, which have so far been Africa-focused, are now eager to increase their similarity to Western museums, which display representations of foreign, "exotic" or otherwise unfamiliar cultures to their local patrons.

The articles selected for publication here bear witness to the long-term promise of scholarship among African Studies graduate students in present-day Africa and North America. These young authors exhibit the passion necessary for a sincere long-term commitment to the peoples of Africa and beyond, and this issue of *Ufahamu* is thus a tribute to their (and others') innovation in the social sciences and the humanities and to their attempts to encourage a larger academic audience to take African Studies more seriously than is presently the norm. Each article grapples with a regionally-specific case-study that has broad and multi-disciplinary implications: the rights of self-representation and of education; internal migration; the struggle between indigenous and colonial institutions of power and social control; national discourse and the creation of nation-states; the controversial subject of clitoridectomy; and finally, an examination of museums and museum culture.

One of the most notable achievements of these combined contributions is their innovative use of language to understand cross-cultural relations and structures of power and representation. By decoding linguistic layers of abuse, dissent and misrepresentation, and by identifying the means and reasons for various forms of social or political empowerment, these authors are moving towards a more profound understanding of the complexity of African and other human realities, both in the past and in the present.

Ghislaine Lydon & Tim Carmichael