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Migration and Sociopolitical Mobility in Africa and the African Diaspora Conference Honors the Career of Ned Alpers

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Author

Sheldon, Kathleen

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Kathleen Sheldon has been a CSW Research Scholar since 1989. She received her Ph.D. in history from UCLA in 1988. Her books include *The A to Z of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*. She is an editor on the listserv H-Luso-Africa, which focuses on the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa.



Migration and Sociopolitical Mobility in Africa and the African Diaspora Conference Honors the Career of Ned Alpers *by Kathleen Sheldon*

**Many former
graduate students and current
colleagues met at UCLA on
April 11 and 12 to honor a mentor
and fellow scholar.**

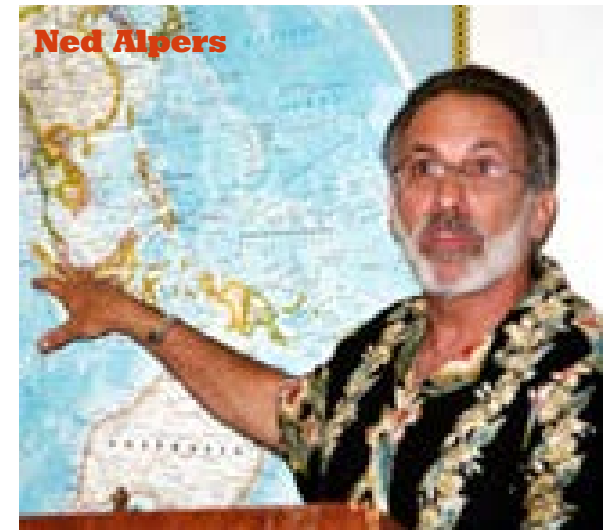
MANY former graduate students and current colleagues met at UCLA on April 11 and 12 to participate in “Migration and Sociopolitical Mobility in Africa and the African Diasporas,” a conference honoring the career of history professor Ned Alpers on his retirement after 45 years on the faculty at UCLA. During two days of panels, twenty papers were presented concerning African women’s history, Indian Ocean history, African Diaspora, slavery, and a range of related topics, all followed by lively discussion with dozens of audience members. Participants traveled from across North America and included several Canadians as well as Thomas Vernet, a French historian now based at the Sorbonne.

Reflecting Ned’s commitment to women’s history and support of female scholars, the Center for the Study of Women was one of many backers. In the early 1980s he served on the Faculty Advisory Committee of what was then the Women’s Studies Program and played a key role in advocating for a research center on women. That became a reality with the Center beginning its work in 1984 under Prof. Karen Rowe. On a personal note, as a graduate student who had just returned from two years research in Mozambique, I was employed

as the first CSW Research Assistant due to his recommendation. At that time there was no CSW office, and Karen Rowe, other staff, and I all worked out of her office in the English Department.

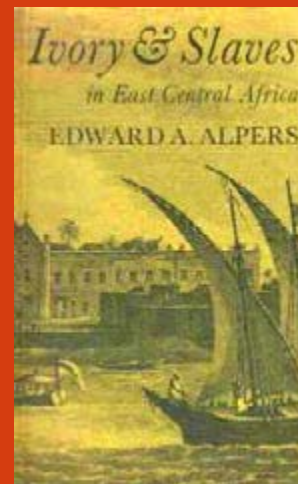
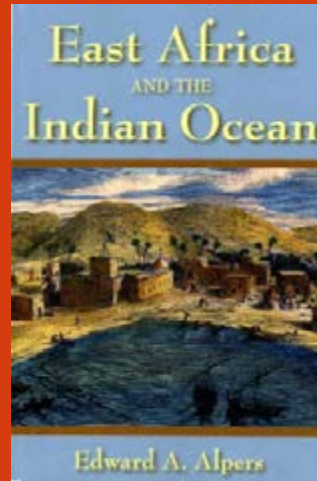
Women and women’s history were a strong presence on the conference program, with a panel on “Women, Gender and Sexuality in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa.” Nwando Achebe, now at Michigan State University, chaired and presented an intriguing paper that dealt in part with the practice of polyandry in a small area in Nigeria. The audience was particularly engaged with her report of a society where women were expected to marry multiple men and there was much discussion about how and why that practice operated. Also on the panel were Jamie Monson (Macalaster College) reporting on a document found in Chinese archives that detailed the 1960s visit of a delegation of Tanzanian women to China, Phoebe Musandu (finishing her Ph.D. at UCLA) discussing the early presence of African women on colonial legislative bodies in Kenya, and my own paper looking at the historiography of African market women’s work.

Peg Strobel (now retired from University of Illinois, Chicago), who finished her degree in 1974 as Ned’s second Ph.D. student, served



as discussant. She recalled preparing to travel to Kenya in the late 1960s to pursue her doctoral research but being uncertain about how to focus that work. At the same time, she was increasingly active in progressive politics including the developing women’s movement. As she and Ned both recall, Ned came to her and suggested that she consider focusing on African women’s history. During a year’s hiatus before she went to Kenya she was able to develop a women-centered research project. The book that came from her dissertation, one of the first monographs on African women to emerge from the modern feminist movement, was published by Yale University Press in 1979. *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975* won the Herskovits Book Award from the African Studies Association.

Other panels included Shobana Shankar (Georgetown University) talking about the Ahmadiyya, a religious organization originally from Pakistan that spread through many parts of Africa influencing Islamic beliefs and practices; José Curto's (York University) paper debating the coastal or inland origins of slaves in West Central Africa; Emily Musil Church (a former CSW Research Scholar and now at Lafayette College) looking at identity issues related to race and nationality in colonial Francophone Caribbean and West African communities; and T. J. Desch-Obi (Baruch College CUNY) on the eastward spread of martial arts practices in central Africa. A panel on rural and urban histories included Willis Okech Oyugi, currently finishing his Ph.D. on Maasai cattle-herding and land tenure under British colonialism in Kenya, Ruby Bell-Gam (UCLA Africanist librarian) on the impact of oil drilling in the Niger Delta, Shimelis Bonsa Gulema (SUNY-Stony Brook) on urban history in Ethiopia, Hideiko Suzuki (McGill University) describing the 19th century commercial history of Kachchhi Bhatiya who traveled from South Asia to Zanzibar and along the East African coast, and Allison Shutt (Hendrix College) with an analysis of ideas about defamation as seen in court documents from Southern Rhodesia



EDWARD A. (NED) ALPERS received his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1966. In addition to teaching at UCLA and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, he has served as President of the African Studies Association (1994) and Chair of its National Program Committee (2001). His research and writing focus on the political economy of international trade in eastern Africa through the nineteenth century, including the cultural dimensions of this exchange system and its impact on gender relations, with special attention to the wider world of the western Indian Ocean. His books include *East Africa and the Indian Ocean*, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (1975), and *History, Memory and Identity* (with Vijayalakshmi Teelock), as well as many book chapters and scholarly articles, and has coedited several books. He is currently writing a political economy of eastern Tanzania in the nineteenth century and is engaged in a long-term study of the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean.

(Zimbabwe). Many of these papers showcased Ned's emphasis on finding and incorporating the voices of Africans, an approach that was innovative when he began his research in the 1960s, and is now essential to any respected work in African history.

The last morning was enlivened by presentations on the Indian Ocean, including Jeremy Prestholdt (UC San Diego) with an overview of global commerce and the Indian Ocean, Matthew Hopper (Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo) on African labor in the date and pearl industries of the Arabian Gulf, Anthony Lee (UCLA) with recovered histories of African slave women in Iran, Karen Flint (University of North Carolina, Charlotte) looking at health issues of indentured servants from India who were working in 19th century South Africa, and Thomas Vernet (Université Paris, Sorbonne) on the late 18th-century history of slavery and clove plantations on Zanzibar.

On Thursday evening conference participants were joined by many of Ned's colleagues from UCLA as the History Department sponsored a reception on the Royce Hall balcony, with numerous stories told about Ned's own travels and teaching years in Tanzania and Somalia. Ghislaine Lydon spoke about his

many influential publications, including his 1975 book on *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa*, his dozens of articles that looked closely at a huge range of topics related to slavery, trade, migration, politics, and community in East Africa, and his work in editing important volumes on slavery and the Indian Ocean. Andrew Apter (UCLA History and Anthropology) explained the three Neds: Ned the Marxist, in recognition of his days at the University of Dar es Salaam, when it was a hotbed of Marxist historiography, and of his deep friendship with Guyanese historian Walter Rodney; Ned the anthropologist, reflecting his training in Africanist social anthropology as a history graduate student at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies; and Ned the Dude, recognizing Ned's easy-going personality and openness to new people and new experiences.

In addition to his role at UCLA related to the Center for the Study of Women, Ned served as Dean of Honors and Undergraduate Programs for more than a decade (1985-1996), and he was chair of the History Department from 2005 to 2010. Over his decades at UCLA he supervised 60 Ph.D. dissertations, including two that will be completed later this year.

Many of those former students were able to participate in the conference, and all enjoyed the chance to catch up with old friends and reconnect with now-dispersed colleagues.

Ned's wife Annie was acknowledged by everyone as an important part of his success, and she and their daughter Leila were both able to attend the conference as well (their son, Joel, had a prior commitment). Awet Weldemichael (University of Kentucky), the indefatigable organizer of the conference, spoke at the end and related a story that was well-known to all in attendance. When Ned was a young scholar, a senior historian asked him about his research. Ned replied at length with great detail about the sources he was using and the particular kinds of information he was discovering. When he finished, the senior historian turned to Annie and asked, "What is Ned researching?" Annie famously and succinctly replied, "The history of trade in East Africa." And the history of trade in East Africa remained a focus of Ned's work for the next several decades, including the forthcoming *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford University Press), and will continue in his retirement as he completes several more works-in-progress.