

# Research Report on the Social Science Research Council's Africa Program

*by Gaurav Desai*

*University of Michigan – Ann Arbor*



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## **Abstract**

This is a report on the week-long archival visit that I undertook to the Rockefeller Archive Center in 2015. My main work involved reading through the archives of the Social Science Research Council's Africa Program and, in particular, the materials associated with a key meeting of scholars in the African humanities that it convened in 1984. That meeting allows us to have a fuller understanding of the trajectory of work in the African humanities in the United States since the 1980s.

# **Research Report on the Social Science Research Council's Africa Program**

During my week-long visit at the Rockefeller Archive Center in 2015, I spent most of my time reading through the archives of the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) Africa Program (1960-1996). The Africa Program was a run by a joint committee of the SSRC and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). It only made research awards in the first three years and then sponsored two conferences, one on methods and objectives of research on urbanization in Africa, held at Airlie House in April 1966, and the other on the traditional artist in African society, held at Lake Tahoe in May 1965. The committee's objectives and interests evolved over time, but as a humanist, my own special interest in the committee's work has been on an important meeting on the African humanities that the committee convened in 1984. What follows is a brief write-up of that event. Some portions of this text will appear in a revised form in a journal article that is under consideration.

On January 30, 1984, Martha Gephardt, then a program officer at the Social Science Research Council and staff liaison to the Joint Committee on African Studies of the American Council Learned Societies (ACLS) and the SSRC, sent a memo to committee members and to two special consultants.<sup>1</sup> The memo was in preparation for a special day-long session to be held later that March about what was to be done to foster and reinvigorate research in the African humanities. The questions that Gephardt wanted the attendees to consider were: "(1) Where should research be going in the humanities? (2) How can we better build links between the humanities and the social sciences? (3) What are strategic entry points? (4) What are the key theoretical issues? (5) What specific projects might be planned to stimulate new research, build better links, and advance our understanding of the key theoretical issues?"<sup>2</sup> The Humanities Planning Meeting that took place on March 21<sup>st</sup> of that year was chaired by Allen Isaacman, Professor of History at the University of Minnesota, and was characterized, as follows:

The impetus for the meeting is an uneven development in African Studies which has favored the social sciences over the humanities. He noted that the Joint Committee on African Studies has, during the past several years, adopted an interventionist perspective toward critical needs in the field of African Studies. Hence it set aside this day, preceding its regular spring meeting, to discuss ways in which the committee can use its limited resources to advance debates in the humanities and to foster links between the humanities and the social sciences in African Studies.<sup>3</sup>

Harold Scheub, a scholar of African oral traditions and folklore at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and thus an important representative from the African humanities on the committee, began by challenging the primary presupposition of the agenda:

It is necessary that we come to an understanding of the 'humanities' in an African context. The artificial divisions suggested by such terms as 'social sciences' and the 'humanities' constitute the problem. The imposition of these divisions on African experiences, materials and institutions has had the effect of making them comprehensible in non-African contexts but such indulgence may have resulted in monumental distortions.<sup>4</sup>

By pointing to artificial divisions that were more about external epistemologies than about African realities, not only was Scheub raising a critique that continues to pose challenges to those who study the continent, but he was also alluding to the project of area studies as one that was fraught with the necessary limitations of translations. Scheub went on to note:

When the Western historian finally discovers that the oral historian is an artist and that the relating of an oral history is not simply genealogical recitation but a performance, when the folklorist finds that the ancient motifs and rhythms of oral performance have a network of ties to social and political realities.

Only then, suggested Scheub, will we have a richer and more meaningful engagement with the practice. Another committee member, Benetta Jules-Rosette of the University of California, San Diego, trained as a sociologist but whose work on tourist art was just about to appear in the form of a monograph

later that year, spoke to her own interests in semiotics as one way to engage in a conversation between humanists and social scientists.<sup>5</sup> The Zairian philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe (Haverford College), who had joined the committee in 1981 and had been commissioned to write a research review paper on African philosophy, offered to organize a series of panels on the African humanities at the next annual convention of the African Studies Association.<sup>6</sup> Mudimbe's own interest was to foster a greater dialogue between North American and European scholars of Africa, and in particular among scholars across the Anglophone and Francophone traditions.

The Joint Committee on African Studies considered a number of actions to foster and encourage a dialogue between the African humanities and the social sciences, including targeting specific humanities topics in the already successful, and in retrospect today, often path-breaking, research review papers that it had commissioned. However, perhaps the most engaging contributions to the deliberations were made by a consultant to the committee, Ivan Karp, an anthropologist then at the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>7</sup> Worried that scholars were increasingly identifying primarily with their disciplines rather than with the areas they studied, Karp cautioned against the loss of local knowledges and area specific concerns that such affinities displayed.<sup>8</sup> And yet, while alert to historical contingencies and local practices, Karp also insisted that Africanists be attentive to the theoretical discussions that had been taking place among humanists outside of African studies. He noted:

Our concepts of theory, often constitute the very idea of what makes a 'field.' At the very least, the theoretical ferment that is so interesting in the humanities and that is drawing them closer to certain kinds of interpretive social science provide productive ways of relating the social sciences to the humanities. This is happening outside of African studies and it may be a measure of the parochialism of African studies specialists that they ignore the larger intellectual world of which they are part.<sup>9</sup>

Admonishing his fellow Africanists for what he saw as their insularity, Karp called for four specific kinds of projects: "research that systematically related political economy and the arts and humanities;" "studies of the relations among the arts

and of the critical role of performance in understanding the objects of humanistic inquiry;” “studies that examine the way and manner in which African studies draws upon an already (existing) discourse to produce its object;” and studies that can foreground the internal dynamisms, historical changes and movements of African material cultures. “We have,” Karp wrote in 1984, “very few studies, to my knowledge, of the evolution of form in the African arts. We know very little about how design is altered when the material or environment in which it is produced undergoes radical change.”<sup>10</sup>

This Humanities Planning Meeting, convened by the Joint ACLS/SSRC Committee on African Studies, was significant for the trajectory of African studies in the United States for a number of reasons. First, as many commentators have since noted, the committee, from its initial constitution in 1960 to its eventual dissolution in 1996, played a formative role in the intellectual orientations and epistemological trajectories of North American African studies.<sup>11</sup> Of this long period of its existence, it was arguably the 1980s that saw the greatest innovation in Africanist research and scholarly engagement with the humanities in general and what was being labeled “theory,” in particular. As the political scientist Pearl T. Robinson has noted in her history of the study of Africa in the United States, “The 1980s saw the launch of a particularly successful attempt to create a new canon, one characterized by theoretical paradigms that crossed disciplinary boundaries, attention to constellations of issues germane to the Africa region, and a rethinking of conceptual tools and methods.”<sup>12</sup> Robinson points out that one of the conditions of possibility for such a re-orientation of the classic methods, tools and epistemologies in African Studies was the increasing number of African scholars such as V.Y. Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah (to name only two among a host of others) who were concurrently making their way to the North American academy. Needless to say, Mudimbe’s central role on the committee and his own scholarly work in fostering the African humanities was the clearest instantiation of this convergence.

Attention to the Humanities Planning Meeting also offers an alternative perspective to the standard narratives of area studies research being a Cold War phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> There are two points to be made here. First, as historians of the

field have amply noted, the trajectories of African studies in the North American context far precede Cold War concerns. That trajectory begins with the study of Africa pioneered by African American and Caribbean scholars such as Alexander Crummell and Edward Blyden, followed by the more academic orientation of scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois at historically Black universities such as Clark, Atlanta, and Howard. It later developed through much foundation and government support at historically white universities, such as Northwestern, by scholars such as Melville Herskovits (who incidentally, spent two years of his early career at Howard).<sup>14</sup> The history of this often fraught trajectory with competing claims for legitimacy and dominance, and its eruption in 1969 in the form of a protest for equity and inclusion by African and African diasporic scholars in the institutional space of the African Studies Association, are well-documented.<sup>15</sup> But in addition to remembering the pre-Cold War origins of the North American study of Africa, the second point to be made here is that while Cold War interests undeniably brought funding and attention to the study of Africa, scholarship in African studies has often exceeded if not eluded the ultimate reaches of state interests. Indeed, as the internal debates among Africanists have often shown, the scholarly acrimony generated on matters such as accepting or not accepting Defense Department funding or engaging or not engaging in policy related consultancies with the Department of State suggest that Africanists have been quite alert to the power/knowledge nexus that has historically plagued area studies research.<sup>16</sup>

The Cold War was undeniably a major force in the lives of Africans throughout the continent. Since area studies was often seen to be no more than a product of the Cold War, many wondered about its fate in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, beginning in the early 1990s, the new mantra was to call for the end of area studies in a world which had declared the “end of history” with the triumphalist narrative of the ascendancy of democratic governance, market economics, and neoliberalism.<sup>17</sup> Globalization, trans-nationalism and its cultural accomplices, such as cosmopolitanism and “world” cultures (literatures, music etc.) began to see increasing favor. To be sure, much was to be gained at this stage by Africanist and non-Africanist scholars in terms of new cross-area and trans-regional conversations. In the context of African studies in particular, the study of the Black Atlantic re-opened long standing conversations with diasporic

communities and scholars, conversations which, as William Martin and Michael West have argued, were often interrupted by mainstream Africanist scholarship in the Cold War years.<sup>18</sup> On the other side of the continent, the growing interest in the Indian Ocean and connections between Africa and the East likewise fostered tremendously rich research and ways of thinking about African peoples and spaces as part of a long history of exchange.<sup>19</sup> And yet, for all these developments, the relevance and importance of area specific knowledge never went away. The ways in which we now conceive of area studies in general, and of African studies in particular, have certainly shifted in fruitful and productive ways -- but giving up on the project of coming to terms with local African knowledges, interests and priorities, in the name of something called the “global,” has never seemed to be a satisfactory alternative. Furthermore, the conditions of possibility of research support today may be no less implicated in statist and capitalist desires than in earlier periods – it may be the war on terror, or the African migration “crises” in Europe, or instead the competition with China and India over African markets, rather than the Cold War, that now spurs extra-academic attention to Africa, but the attention it seems is here to stay. Regardless of where individual scholars place themselves in relation to such interests, it is imperative for Africanists – and particularly younger scholars coming into the field - to be critically engaged with both the historical trajectories of African studies as they have been practiced, as well as to the demands and pulls made on them as scholars, citizens and activists committed to the study of a historically much abused and maligned continent.

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<sup>1</sup> The committee members who attended the meeting were Allen Isaacman, Benetta Jules-Rosette, V.Y. Mudimbe, Jane Guyer, Thandika Mkandawire, Michael J. Watts, Harold Scheub and Fassil G. Kiros. The two consultants were Ivan Karp and Paul Riesman.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Gephardt, “Memo” dated Jan 30, 1984, Folder 98, Box 18, G1, A1, S1, Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). Gaurav Desai thanks and acknowledges the support from the Rockefeller Archive Center to undertake research in the SSRC and Ford Foundation records.

<sup>3</sup> “Notes on March 21<sup>st</sup> Humanities Planning Meeting”, Folder 100, Box 19, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC.

<sup>4</sup> “Memo for the SSRC Humanities Planning Meeting,” Harold Scheub, 12 March 1984, Folder 98, Box 18, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC.

<sup>5</sup> Benetta Jules-Rosette, “Suggestions for the Humanities Planning Committee,” Folder 98, Box 18, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. See also, Benetta Jules-

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Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*. (New York: Plenum Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> “Notes on March 21st Humanities Planning Meeting,” Folder 100, Box 19, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC. Mudimbe’s paper, “African Gnosis: Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge” was published in the *African Studies Review* in 1986. It was later revised and incorporated in his Herskovits Prize winning book *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) which is considered by many to be a paradigm shifting contribution to the study of the African humanities. See V.Y. Mudimbe, “African Gnosis: Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge,” *African Studies Review*, 23 nos.2/3 (1986): 149-233.

<sup>7</sup> Some topics for future research review papers included “the psychological dimension in African Studies, e.g. the African Oedipus, African music, Christianity in Africa.” See “Notes on March 21st Humanities Planning Meeting”, Folder 100, Box 19, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC. See also, Ivan Karp, “Memo”, Feb 22, 1984, Folder 100, Box 19, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC.

<sup>8</sup> So, he argued, “Graduate training has increasingly become centered on the acquisition of disciplinary skills and fledgling researchers often define themselves as anthropologists, political scientists or art historians first and Africanists second. An extreme, though not uncommon form for this orientation to take is the claim that the *where* of the research is irrelevant—that migration is the issue whether it is studied in West Africa or the Amazon Basin.” Ivan Karp, “Memo”, Feb 22, 1984, Folder 100, Box 19, G1, A1, S1, SSRC Records, RAC.

<sup>9</sup> Karp, “Memo.” The debates about the role of theory and postmodern thought in African studies continued to be echoed into the late twentieth century. Two markers are, Megan Vaughan, “Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or Has Postmodernism Passed Us By?” *Social Dynamics*, 20.2 (Summer 1994): 1-23; Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994, 216-221. For Karp’s own thoughts on the matter a decade after the meeting, see Ivan Karp, “Does Theory Travel? Area Studies and Cultural Studies,” *Africa Today*, 44 (1997): 281-295. See also, Paul T. Zeleza, “Historicizing the Posts: The View from African Studies,” in Zine Magubane (ed). *Postmodernism, Postcoloniality and African Studies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, (2003), 1-37.

<sup>10</sup> Karp, “Memo.”

<sup>11</sup> The Joint Committee was originally set up to administer a three-year program of grants for research by individuals on Africa south of the Sahara funded by the Ford Foundation. In 1962, the Ford Foundation renewed support for another three-year period. The purview of the committee, its activities and scope changed over time and its archives housed at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York, provide a dynamic picture of the academic debates, tensions and negotiations that Africanists who served on the committee made as the field developed and expanded.

<sup>12</sup> Pearl T. Robinson, “Area Studies in Search of Africa: The Case of the United States,” in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *The Study of Africa, Vol 11: Global and Transnational Engagements*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007: 235-276. Quote on 257.

<sup>13</sup> This is by no means to discount the significant role of Cold War interests in the funding of African Studies. It is only to suggest that work in African studies often exceeding the interests and goals of such funding. For a critical exposé of the funding of African studies, see Africa Research Group, *African Studies in America, The Extended Family: A Tribal Analysis of U.S. Africanists: Who They Are; Why to Fight Them*. Cambridge, MA: October 1969. See also, Mahmood Mamdani, “African Studies, Made in the U.S.A.” *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Number 2 (1990): 7-10. See David L Szanton, “Introduction: The Origin, Nature and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States,” in David L Szanton (ed.), *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 1-33, for an alternative accounting of the work of area studies.

<sup>14</sup> See Robinson (above). See also, William G. Martin and Michael O. West, “The Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration of the Africanist Enterprise, U.S.A.’ in William G. Martin and Michael O. West (eds). *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning*

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of *Africa*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999): 85-122.

<sup>15</sup> For first-hand accounts and perspectives on the Montreal meeting, see the Special Issue of *Africa Today* titled “Crisis in African Studies.” *Africa Today*, Oct-Nov-Dec 1969, Vols 16, nos. 5&6. Elisabeth McMahon and Jemima Pierre also discuss this conference in their chapters in this volume.

<sup>16</sup> For some voices in the debate, see the articles in the special issue of *African Issues* titled “Identifying New Directions for African Studies,” *African Issues*, vol 30, no 2. (2002). Guest Editor: Larry W. Bowman. For an overview of the debate see, Gaurav Desai, “The Scholar and the State,” *The Global South*, vol 1, no. 1 (2007): 98-108. On the divisions among Africanists on policy related work, see Jane Guyer, *African Studies in the United States: A Perspective*. Atlanta: African Studies Association, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; J Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origin of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002; Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, among many others.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, Michael Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: the Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2010, among many others.