

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA - AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER

***Why I Am (Not) an Africanist: A Reflection* [1]**

(Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Penn African Studies Workshop, October 17, 1997)

by

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This reflection is divided into three parts: I. 'Oriental Studies,' II. 'Asian and African Languages and Literature,' and III. 'Humanities.' These rubrics are the names of administrative and academic units to which I have been attached. I ask indulgence in allowing me to frame a discussion of those issues I think relevant to the question of area studies around my own academic history. I should point out that a number of my formulations here are indebted to an earlier reflection, 'Mapping Communities and their Cultural Territories.' [2]

I. Oriental Studies

I am not considered, in prevailing area-study or funding configurations, an Africanist. I was trained (primarily) in Arabic and Islamic Studies in a University of Pennsylvania department known for a century as 'Oriental Studies,' [3] in which one could specialize in Ancient Chinese History, Modern Israeli Folklore, Middle Kingdom Egyptian Archeology, Medieval Arabic Literature, Sanskrit Philology, Persian Romance, Japanese Art, Turkish Music, Midrash... and so on. This department recently -- on July 1st, 1992 -- changed its name to 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.' The component 'Asian' is meant to evoke China, Japan, and Korea without the attendant racism considered implicit in the historically respectable, yet un-worthy adjective 'Oriental.' A number of distinguished institutions worldwide have resisted this change. North America's own American Oriental Society maintains, and sustains, four traditional divisions: (1) Traditional

India and South Asia, to which Inner Asia has been added, (2) East Asia, (3) the Ancient Near East, and (4) Islam -- this last the only non-geographical division. But other institutions have embraced the change. The 'International Congress of Orientalists' has opted for 'International Congress of Asian and North African Studies.' (At its most recent meeting, in Budapest this year, the plenary focus was on 'Orientalist scholarship'.)

To return to the Penn department, the component 'Middle Eastern' in the new name 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies' was a compromise meant to cover everything Judaic, Islamic and, I suppose, Iranian, though perhaps Persia was assigned to the 'Asian' component in the name. The latter evidently also includes Ancient India, curiously, but traditionally, still in the domain of the former 'Oriental Studies,' and not reassigned to 'South Asia Regional Studies,' one of the midnight children with which it shares space and dually-appointed faculty. The component 'Middle Eastern' also served to exorcize Edward Said's 'Oriental' demon, [4] though, it must be said, that the initiative to change the department's name was a very mediatized undergraduate Asian-American one. [5] Indeed, the University now has a program in 'Asian American Studies,' headed, uncannily, by a Sanskritist appointed in both 'South Asia Regional Studies' and 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.'

Though the decision to change the name to 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies' was made by administrative fiat (in response to pressure), the actual name change was left to the department. Not unlike the decision of Marvel Comics to determine by ballot whether 'Batman and Robin' readers wanted Robin killed off or retained, the department contacted its own, and solicited suggestions -- which would be put to a vote -- about which disciplinary siblings, wards, and sidekicks would get the boot, and which the letterhead. My tongue-in-confused-cheek 'Non-White Studies' apparently never made the short-list though suggestions such as 'Non-American, Non-Greco-Roman Studies' and 'Anonymous Studies' were published and circulated. [6]

The decision to settle on 'Asian *and* Middle Eastern' was a curious one. Why 'and Middle Eastern' when that did not evoke Judaic Studies, or the Ancient Near East, names still given to those divisions within the department, divisions that account between them for half the faculty and students? Why not follow the lead of other North American universities by opting for, and voting for, say, the disciplinarily and geographically more encompassing 'Near Eastern'? Neither is altogether accurate, but not-altogether-accuracy seems to be *de rigueur* in naming areas for study. 'Asian,' for instance, here does not include, or pretend to, South Asia, South-East Asia, or North Asia... If Asia -- named incidentally by the Turks for Pharaoh's wife Asiya, who raised Moses as her own -- is in fact Asia for at least some of its inhabitants, the Middle East, on the other hand, is only the middle of another's imagined Orient. Maybe there is a clue about the choice of the name 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies' in the fact that the Judaic division has the Center for Jewish Studies, a Penn-affiliated, independently funded institution that focuses on Judaica and Hebraica, that has Aleph, its own discrete library cataloging system unhooked, technology notwithstanding, to Penn's larger Franklin library catalog system. And maybe there is a clue in the fact that the Ancient Near East's archeologists have the University Museum, another Penn-affiliated institution that also has its own library -- mercifully linked to Franklin -- and its own funding sources.

I might add as an aside that since the 1992 decision, a number of significant funding-linked developments have taken place. This year alone the fledgling Center for East Asian Studies (1994) received two and a half million dollars in matching funds for Korean Studies, and the Middle East Center -- which over the decades, went from occupying an entire building at 38th and Walnut Streets to a two hundred square foot office -- now hangs on for dear life as it was denied Title VI funding.

Maybe ultimately then the name-change did not boil down to a matter of identity or integrity, tradition or turf, but simply to dollars and not so common cents, priorities and purse-strings. The name mattered most to the East Asia and Middle East specialists, who, unlike the archeologists and Judaica/Hebraica scholars, foresaw -- even if they did not in the end get -- institutional capital by appropriating the name. But it strikes

me that they missed the point that their regional identities, Middle Eastern and East Asian, were anomalies in a decade that was moving away from climes and toward something grander, even if that new catchment did not (yet) have a name. [7]

But naming, here, does not seem to me to be as much about social and political mandates, in the way it evidently has been in the case of African/American studies: I think of a number of the essays in James Conyers' recent volume. [8] But we cannot get away from the fact that, in Basil Davidson's trenchant words, 'The frontiers are there, the frontiers are sacred. What else, after all, could guarantee privilege and power to the ruling elites?' [9] In area studies, these ruling elites were probably, to a greater extent than Goran Hyden gives credit, 'conservative Cold War strategists.' 'Liberals with a commitment to reforming higher education curricula' were, to be sure, also involved in the re-configurations, but they were not alone. [10] Others lurked purveying essences -- the Celtic spirit, the Asiatic mode, negritude, creolite, Islam, Slavic origins -- in an effort, in crude terms, to divide and rule. [11] It is old news that the American academy is a "direct, shaped product of founding ideologies," but we must remain acutely aware that such ideologies bring heavy liabilities and can, as history has mercilessly shown, also bring heavy casualties. [12]

II. Asian and African Languages and Literature

From 1989 to 1991, the PC years, I taught in 'Asian and African Languages and Literature,' a 'section' at Duke University. It was not quite a department, the University not seeing fit to fund what in its view essentially amounted to a motley cluster of language specialists in Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Korean, and Japanese. The absurdity of the name 'Asian and African Languages and Literature' was lost on no-one, least of all on those of us who constituted it. But Duke had innovated a number of unique programs that subverted the dominant funding paradigms and we were all pleased about that. Indeed, when I proposed a core-course for the minor entitled 'Introduction to Asian and African Literatures,' we were able to cross-list it as a course in the University's Program in Literature, a division that eschewed language- and language group-based scholarship in literary studies. Although Anthony Appiah, Skip Gates and Valentin Mudimbe held traditional appointments, Philosophy, English and Romance Languages respectively, it was from the Program in Literature that many of their students came. Some of these students did comparative work in literature but not all. The Program in Literature was certainly not a misnomer for 'Comparative Literature.'

Comparative studies did exist at Duke, also in a unique way. A department bearing the name 'Comparative Area Studies' prepared students for area studies in general. It attracted Dan Johns's Africanists, John Richards' India specialists, and all of our department-less, and thus major-less, 'Asian and African Languages and Literature' students, from those interested in medieval Hispano-Arabic poetry, to Arab-Israeli politics, to Indian health care, to the Taiwanese economy, to pre-modern Japanese art. But I suppose that ultimately we were not able to get away from the ghettoizing, even by our own students, some of whom took courses in 'Asian and African Literature' merely to satisfy an impulse to give Asia and Africa a momentary ear.

The media had its own take. Just before the military onslaught of Iraq I got a phone call from a Durham daily asking whether I would be willing to comment on the 'historical background' to the imminent War and to Iraq's territorial claims on Kuwait. I was surprised. Why me, I asked? Because I taught Arabic, came the answer. I paused and then asked whether Annabelle Patterson and Stanley Fish, scholars of early English literature, had been called when Britain reclaimed the Malvinas as their Falklands? The reporter went quiet.

As it turns out, I was qualified to answer the question. But I wanted to make a point and kept my silence, suggesting they contact any number of political scientists on the faculty. I resented the reasoning that led the reporter to call me, but I realized that my training did make of me something of a 'Middle East' specialist. Little did I know then that my department at Penn would shortly thereafter enshrine that aspect of my training in its new name.

III. Humanities

Back to my season of migration. In 1993 I found myself in Mauritius. In 1994 I applied for a History position in the Department of Humanities at the University of Mauritius. I later heard that I had not been seriously considered because my degrees were not in 'History' but in 'Oriental Studies.' In 1995 I reapplied for the same position, this time including a statement explaining that I was nothing if not a historian. Three months later I was teaching a course in Historical Methodology, another in the Medieval History of the Near East, and a course, in French, on French Medieval Literary History. I had been hired by an "African" University to teach French literature. And all the while I was given (not so) subtle signals about becoming an Indian Ocean specialist.

The paradox of which I am an example is a curious spin on the paradox of wanting to downgrade area studies while expecting in-depth knowledge of specific regions. My personal paradox is that I have been reconfigured and am, in the final analysis -- or at any rate the current analysis -- a species of Africanist: I was trained in a language spoken in all of North Africa, which led me to spend a fellowship year in Egypt; I have taught Sudanese, Zimbabwean and South African literature; I teach courses in North African history; my research focuses on the medieval maritime history of East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean; and, as someone who lives and works in Africa, I have a moral and intellectual commitment to it.

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Edward Said has observed that "No-one today is purely one thing." [13] Indeed, the concept of area studies as islands of cartographically meaningful units must also be revisited. They too are no longer purely one thing. In fact, if we think, or continue to think, of area studies as islands, we -- that is we the conservative Cold War strategists, the liberals with a commitment to reforming higher education curricula, the special interest groups -- we risk forgetting that the boundaries we ascribed area studies were ascribed and are not pre-existing, dare I say divinely sanctioned, ones. Just as "the concept of nationhood which relies upon the cultural idea of the island" is no longer tenable, [14] so too is the concept of an area studies which relies on predetermined boundaries tenable only with the greatest of difficulty.

Cultures, communities, and group experiences are not pure, essential, but "oddly hybrid... partak[ing] of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross[ing] national boundaries, defy[ing] the police action of simple dogma..." [15] There may be a tendency to see culture and group experience as enclosed and enclosable, but just as cultures are not impermeable, neither are area studies, and just as the boundaries of culture are fluid, at best, so too are those of area studies. Goran Hyden writes that no one school or theory is singularly relevant:

"An effort to portray Africa as just one of many regions in the world with little identity of its own is no better than suggesting that only Africa's peculiarity is what matters. African studies cannot flourish without recognition of intellectual pluralism and mutual respect of contending perspectives."

The experiences of cultures are also fraught with what James Snead has called contagion. [16] Snead specifically criticizes Africanists who compress variety into identity. He believes that this kind of compression turns critics and observers into racists or nationalists. Racists purvey unproblematic compressed identities such as 'africanite' where a black, African writer's work is obligatorily "an expression of 'negritude,' a verbal manifestation of a particular soul;" and Nationalists are preoccupied with "mapping the geography of... a literature conveniently contained within... arbitrary territorial boundaries..." [17] Snead draws on the cartographic metaphor and calls these and other projections "flattened perspectives."

Cartographies are not useful when we come to the realization that area studies, like the areas they purport to re/present, are possessed of transgressive boundaries; are irredeemably plural, postmodern; and are a space that must be shared, that necessitate overlap and affinity. It is important therefore to determine what the

preconditions are under which the formulations of identity and difference do not risk becoming static categories used to polarize and fragment the intellectual community. [18] And important also to determine, in view of the fact that a system of thought that represents the 'other' as a variation of the 'same' cannot do justice, what concept of difference can bear witness to particularity without dependence on foundational models. [19]

Only when funding agencies and socio-political agendas can accept configurations of overlap and interdependence, can boundaries be crossed, new territories charted in defiance of canonic enclosures, and can area studies be transfigured in new maps to become truly enhancing, unburdened by territorial, exclusionary and proprietary impulses. [20] Only then -- for me at any rate -- can we hope to sustain academic training that produces, in Hyden's words, "major theoretical and methodological insights with implications" across the disciplines and planet. [21]

The relationship between African Studies and Africana Studies has been fraught with just such problems. Accounts of their interaction is not unlike a romantic relationship in which the partners spend more time discussing why one doesn't close the tube of toothpaste, or why one doesn't like the other's friends, rather than enjoying their possibly limited time together. Houston Baker has written poignantly of shifting horizons, contested spaces, and simulacra in this regard. [22] While acknowledging the political reality, and ground reality, of such shifts and contests, it must be recognized that there is much to be gained from conversation. In a recently published article, Sabra Webber has -- in an echo of Snead -- suggested resistance to "the flattening steamroller of theory." [23] She decries the fact that the innovative perspectives of Ranajit Guha and his Subaltern Group have made only the narrowest of inroads into area studies. I join Webber in inviting conversations between the disciplines, in urging support and funding for the 'small voices' in a way the Subaltern groups are doing. This can surely be done without sacrificing whatever may be gained from retaining area studies nomenclature and administrative autonomy.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I should like to suggest that circumscribed studies -- whether they are African Studies, Indian Ocean Studies, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, or whatever -- are utterly desirable for the excellent broad-based training they offer, provided we not remain wedded to our areas. We must not forget that however marginal, Maritime Studies, Peace Studies, Subaltern Studies and the more recognizable Folklore Studies, Music, and History of Art, have successfully questioned the ultimately arbitrary boundaries of the academy. Indeed, as Webber has observed, in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, it is in Folklore that much innovative scholarship has flourished. (Regrettably, one of the few doctoral Folklore programs in the country, here at Penn, has been declared "not a priority" and is on its way out. [24])

The ability to question and cross the very boundaries area studies erect must be constitutive of our academic identity, and of our intellectual honesty. We must distance ourselves from configurations that require borders, except inasmuch as these identities are translated into provisionally meaningful administrative units.

It is, I confess, with great satisfaction that in spite of, and because of, my area studies background I am able to be part of a Department of Humanities at an Indian Ocean University, and purvey a serenely conflicted identity both as an Africanist, and not.

NOTES

[1] This is the slightly revised text of a paper presented at 'Cross-Currents in Africa,' the Fifth Annual African Studies Consortium Workshop held at the University of Pennsylvania on 17 October 1997. I am grateful to Sandra Barnes and the African Studies Center for including me in this workshop, and to Lynette Loose for her support and kindness.

[2] A revised version of that paper appears under the title 'Culture's Permeable Frontiers' in *The Zimbabwean Review* 3/4 (October-December 1997), 12-14. I am grateful to Carole Pearce for having kindly solicited it for publication.

[3] Founded in 1910.

[4] Edward W. Said, **Orientalism** (New York 1978); cf. Aijaz Ahmad, **In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures** (London 1994).

[5] **The Philadelphia Inquirer** (18 December 1991); **The Daily Pennsylvanian** (23 March 1992).

[6] 'Oriental Studies Graduate Students' Poll on the Name of the Department' [1992]. I am grateful to Peggy Guinan and Diane Bergin Moderski for having made this circular available to me.

[7] Remembering, with Korzybski, that the map is not, and can never be, the territory.

[8] Cf. James L. Conyers, Jr., 'Introduction,' in idem (ed), **Africana Studies. A Disciplinary Quest for Both Theory and Method** (Jefferson, NC and London 1997), 1; and Darlene Clark Hine, 'Black Studies: An Overview,' in Conyers (ed), **Africana Studies** 7-8.

[9] Basil Davidson, 'On Revolutionary Nationalism: The Legacy of Cabral,' in **Race and Class** 27/3 (Winter 1986), 43.

[10] Goran Hyden, 'African Studies in the Mid-1990s: Between Afro-Pessimism and Amero-Skepticism,' in **African Studies Review** 39/2 (September 1996), 1-17.

[11] Cf. Edward W. Said, **Culture and Imperialism** (New York 1994 [1993]), 16: "[the liabilities] have much to do not only with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, but also with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt to be necessary."

[12] Houston A. Baker, 'Black Studies: A New Story,' in Conyers (ed), **Africana Studies** 31. Baker does acknowledge that American universities are also sites of resistance.

[13] Said, **Culture and Imperialism** 336.

[14] Gillian Beer, 'The island and the aeroplane: the case of Virginia Woolf', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed), **Nation and Narration** (London and New York 1990), 266.

[15] Said, **Culture and Imperialism** 15.

[16] James Snead, 'European pedigrees/African contagions: nationality, narrative, and communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed,' in Bhabha (ed), **Nation and Narration** 245: "Perhaps the most important aspect of cultural contagion is that by the time one is aware of it, it has already happened. Contagion, being metonymic (con+tangere = 'touching together'), involves... an actual process of contacts between people, rather than a quantitative setting of metaphorical value... Opposed to Dr Johnson's 'pedigree' that sought to discover lost, but recoverable differences, contagion represents the existence of recoverable affinities between disparate races of people... Even as collection domesticates and organizes barriers and distances, contagion seems to have already made obsolete the barriers to its own spread."

[17] All quotations from Snead, 'European pedigrees/African contagions,' 238.

[18] See Françoise Lionnet, **Postcolonial Representations: women, literature, identity** (Ithaca, NY 1995),

2.

[19] Adapting Lionnet, *Representations* 34, and Roger Toumson, 'The Question of Identity in Caribbean Literature,' in *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 5 (Fall 1986), 134, whom Lionnet cites.

[20] Cf. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 317.

[21] Hyden, 'African Studies,' 13. For Hyden, Robert Bates, Valentin Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr, *Africa in the Disciplines* (Chicago 1993) demonstrates this for African Studies.

[22] Baker, 'Black Studies' in Conyers (ed), *Africana Studies* 31.

[23] Sabra J. Webber, 'Middle East Studies & Subaltern Studies,' in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 31/1 (July 1997), 12.

[24] *The Daily Pennsylvanian* (16 October 1997).

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