

# African Studies and its Configurations: Histories, Challenges and Opportunities

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Prof. Enocent Msindo (PhD, Cambridge),

Director, African Studies Centre, Rhodes University, RSA

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## Abstract:

Developed in response to the changing Western imperial interests on the continent, African studies as a field of research has predominantly mirrored the evolving Western geo-political and economic interests in Africa. Although the radical histories of the 1960s and subsequent work, (including the work of CODESRIA and other independent scholars) tried to critique some colonial tropes about the continent, they did not do enough. Radical nationalist historiographies were in fact a part of the broader Western political decolonization politics associated with receding empires. This historical paper traces the emergence, growth and development of African studies in the Global North and subsequently in Africa since the colonial era. It argues that regardless of the growing diversity of specialisations on various issues on African studies in the new African universities, foundational assumptions and stereotypes about the continent and 'the African' have not quite abated and have not been challenged enough. In most cases, contemporary analysis of Africa, particularly since the 1980s have continued to mirror the 'moving walls' of imperial and neo-colonial interests. It is therefore not surprising that the bulk of research done in Africa are deeply Afropessimist in nature and focus on the state – its poor economic performance, bad governance, and related issues. Unsurprisingly, no solutions are proffered as the intention is not to do so, but to justify the Afropessimist narrative which centres on the assumption that since the retreat of colonial regimes, the continent has increasingly become a site of despair. Without completely ignoring the issues of leadership, state institutions and broad studies of the state in Africa, contemporary African studies will realise its value by focussing on other, not so overt issues within the African underbelly and ask deeper questions about the hidden voices of Africans, particularly those at a distance from the state.

## The Chequered Pasts of African Studies – reflections on UK, USA and France

The idea of African studies started in the Global North, leading later to the founding of Chairs of African studies in the 1960s chiefly at Ibadan (Nigeria), Makerere (Uganda), and

Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) mainly by the Oxbridge Universities of the United Kingdom. In Africa, an environment had to be created for this new area of critical enquiry to grow. The introduction of African studies coincided with two key developments – the birth, at least in many parts of the continent, of the new independent African states following the first phases of political decolonisation and the rise, development and institutionalisation of African higher education institutions. As Tiyambe Zeleza observed, African studies was “... a direct product of the rise of African nationalism and decolonisation, which led to the establishment of new African nation-states and universities.”<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to examine its earlier foundations.

Studies of Africa predates the colonial occupation, going back to the slave trade and in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. At that point, most of the writers were not academic experts. Earlier descriptions of Africa by missionaries, hunters, explorers and other fortune seekers, particularly marred by strong Social-Darwinist thoughts, were followed by a corpus of work by early colonial administrators, cultural studies ‘experts,’ including anthropologists, and others who boasted years of experience among Africans. From every colony, these staunch believers in the power of ‘European civilisation’ produced tonnes of largely descriptive accounts of what they appeared to have observed about Africa, spiced up with very strong Eurocentric biases. This explains their popular perceptions of Africans as backward, and requiring to be civilised. Many of the accounts suggests that the main concern of the time was to ‘know the African’, basically an information and intelligence gathering exercise, like they did earlier in India.<sup>2</sup> None of these early writers about Africa were interested in thick descriptions and critical evaluation of Africa and Africans’ social, political and economic processes, nor did they show any critical appreciation of the nature of existing African civilisations and technologies that they saw on the continent. Where they could not ignore such civilisations, they ascribed foreign ownership to them, and on this the Great Zimbabwe controversy is but one example.

A systematic study of Africa, however started almost midway into the colonial era. This scholarship still reflected the changing Western agenda and interests on Africa. In Britain, institutes such as the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) had long been founded in 1916 as the School of Oriental Studies and in 1938 as SOAS (now including African Studies), for the purpose of strengthening Britain’s economic, political and military stranglehold in Africa and Asia. SOAS provided education to colonial administrators, commerce, missionaries, medical personnel, teachers and also military officers. The intention was to equip them with knowledge (of customs, religion, language, law, history of Africans and Asians) and requisite skills to do their job in Africa at the time.<sup>3</sup> The School of Oriental and African Studies was therefore strategically configured to support British

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<sup>1</sup> Paul T. Zeleza, ‘The Disciplining of Africa’, in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (ed), *The Study of Africa, Vol. 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, CODESRIA, Dakar, 2006, pp. 1-29.

<sup>2</sup> See C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, CUP, Cambridge, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Fyfe, ‘The Emergence and Evolution of African Studies in the United Kingdom’, in William G. Martin and Michael O. West (eds), *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1999, pp. 54-61.

imperial interests, and its agenda slowly morphed with time due to changing British colonial interests.

In addition to the work done at SOAS before the 1950s was the work of the Royal African Society, initially founded in 1901 as the African Society but renamed in 1935. The Royal African Society had its own journal *African Affairs* that published some academic articles, but was predominantly meant for general readers who had interests in African issues. There was also a more academic society, the International Institute of African Languages and Culture, founded in 1928. It was later renamed the International African Institute (IAI) in 1945 and published its own journal *Africa*. The major aim of this society (the African Institute) was to “...coordinate the work of international scholars doing African research and to relate their findings to the needs of those who were working in Africa.”<sup>4</sup> It therefore offered space for government, missionaries and scholars to cooperate and share insights about Africa. As observed by Roquinaldo Ferreira, “Between 1942 to 1948, soldiers and employees of the British crown formed the main part of the students (34%) of the IAI, followed by diplomats and staff of the Department of Colonial Affairs.”<sup>5</sup> However, in the 1950s onward, SOAS, with much more funds from the state and Trusts, trained a new crop of students (including a few African students) to undertake cutting edge research in Africa at these times of transition of their politics and economies (broadly the era of political decolonisation).

What is often missing from discussions of the genesis of African studies is the work of the British Lord Hailey and his British Committee’s *African Survey* published in 1938. In response to the famous challenge at a Rhodes Memorial Lecture by General Jan Smuts to compile an African survey about the various and conflicting principles that were being applied in the “administrative, social, educational, and legal fields” in African colonies, and a “review of the extent to which modern knowledge was being applied to African problems”, Lord Hailey (who had just retiring from being Governor of India) and a committee of eminent government officials in England; prominent colonial policy makers like Lord Lugard (the famous proponent of the Dual Mandate and its associated indirect rule policy); Henry Clay the economic adviser to the Bank of England, key intellectuals from both the sciences and humanities, and journal publishers constituted a team to do an Africa survey focussing on British, French and Belgian colonies south of the Sahara. Their results were compiled in an 1837-page volume, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* which research was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Rhodes Trust.<sup>6</sup> Lord Hailey’s team described what they observed, ranging from the continent’s geography, its peoples, languages, population growth, government, law and justice, native administration, taxation and the economic system, labour, land, agriculture, forestry, water, soil erosion, health, education, economic development, transport systems, etc. Critical however is the curiosity they generated for studying Africa and how they

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Fyfe, ‘The Emergence and Evolution of African Studies in the United Kingdom’, pp. 54-61.

<sup>5</sup> Roquinaldo Ferreira, ‘The institutionalization of Africa Studies in the United States: origin, consolidation and transformation’, *Revista Brasileira de Historia*, Sao Paulo, vol. 30, No. 59, p. 71-88, 2010, see page 77.

<sup>6</sup> Lord Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1938, p. v., xxi.

recommended that Africa must be studied, for they had interdisciplinary approaches in mind, albeit located in his team's paternalistic British or western attitude. The African Survey envisaged usable research that would be undertaken by western scholars with the primary aim to help solve what they perceived to be the key African issues. Like previous approaches, it was located in the need to strengthen colonial control by having to think deeply about how to solve 'the native problem'. I quote Hailey in some detail here:

The special needs of Africa at this stage are for a more comprehensive study of the factors which determine the nature of its social development, and a more scientific approach to the problem of health and material well-being to which its physical characteristics has given rise. The studies require for the solution of such problems as they can offer an unusual interest to those who undertake them. ... **Africa presents itself as a living laboratory**, in which the reward of study may prove to be not merely the satisfaction of an intellectual impulse, but an effective addition to the welfare of a people. A scientific approach to the question of African development demands the study of problems of a social nature equally with those involving the application of the physical sciences. ... No one question can be studied in isolation, there is a close interdependence among all the essential problems of Africa. ... research into the problems of African development must always have something of the character of a co-operative undertaking.<sup>7</sup>

I will also reflect here on their recommendations in relation to what they saw as 'The Future of African Studies' in their 24<sup>th</sup> chapter as it had a bearing on what later happened in the 1950s and beyond. The first one was the issue of multi-disciplinary research to examine the relationship between seemingly different, yet related phenomena. Lord Hailey argues, "... the task of the health services is not merely to give protection against prevailing diseases; they must seek, in company with the soil chemist, for the factors in the soil which account for malnutrition, and must combine with the entomologist to explore the bionomics of the insect vector of disease. Often the solution does not even lie in the application of any of the processes of medical science, but in the redistribution of populations in order to avoid contact with sources of infection, or in order to secure for them better means of nutrition."<sup>8</sup> This resonates, in some ways with the thinking about multiplicity and relationality. Hailey's concern, however, was not purely academic, but to provide scientific and administrative solutions to the problems identified in Africa.

Hailey's second recommendation was that all the efforts at research about Africa, which had hitherto been sponsored by external agencies and government be more fully coordinated and centralised and from the centre develop with what he saw as "... a chain of interconnected research stations based on central imperial institutions", as this co-ordination will help give direction and avoid duplication of work done by several related research organisations.<sup>9</sup> In defence of knowledge imperialism, he argued, "... Great Britain should take a larger share in African research, as an alternative to the expansion of the

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<sup>7</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. xxiv-xxv

<sup>8</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. 1612.

<sup>9</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. 1624, 25-27.

establishments employed in the colonies”, reasoning that a metropolitan research institution would be more suited to attracting career researchers than colonial ones who are too stuck in routine work for their research to be effective. For Lord Hailey, the overriding concern was not merely the furtherance of research about Africa, but also about making the knowledge publicly accessible to (the knowledge and colonial enthusiasts in the metropolises and) those who were interested in studying Africa.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the production of knowledge of Africa was to serve huge imperial interests and to incite the curiosities of the public supporters of the British empire. From this, we understand the coloniality of knowledge. **We see how knowledge and information was to be pillaged from Africa, carefully interpreted, controlled, and fed into a central colonial system, thereby establishing new kinds of knowledge colonialism or knowledge dependency.** This is why we find more data about everything on Africa in the colonial headquarters than in the national archives of the African countries themselves.

Third, Hailey recommended the **creation of a special research fund controlled from one centre** on the premise that research in the colonies was not feasible without the generous funding from the British Treasury. His team argued that funding would strengthen existing collaborations between research in the colonies and the British universities with the British Colonial Office or with executive authorities via a system of centrally controlled grants.<sup>11</sup> Fourth, and finally, the *African Survey* recommended that **a bureau of information be instituted to make information about Africa more widely available. It was recommended that all the journals about Africa published in the United Kingdom, in the colonies and elsewhere as well as bulletins and any other research reports, including general information about Africa be collected and collated by a proposed African Bureau to be situated in London** – and that this information be used to guide those who would like to research on Africa.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that this recommendation came at a time the British government was also organising its department of information with a view to centralising information control in its whole empire.

In essence, our prolonged discussion above about the *African Survey* was important in helping us understand an important turning point in African Studies: from the curiosity of general writers, missionaries, colonial officials, medical officials, and early colonial anthropologists to moves towards the intellectually engaging the niggling African issues by scholarly experts. Although the *African Survey* was not intrinsically designed as a deep academic study, its recommendations had ramifications for policy changes; for new approaches to funding; for proposing deliberate centralisation of information harvested from all over Africa, and for creating deliberative spaces for emergent African studies experts. The *African Survey* sparked deeper interest in academic research since the post-War era as more universities opened up well funded African Studies programs. The rapid growth in academic African studies after 1945 and the associated rebranding and professionalising of previously generic colonial and imperial journals to cater for a growing

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<sup>10</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. 1628-1629.

<sup>11</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. 1631.

<sup>12</sup> Hailey, *An African Survey*, p. 1634.

academic audience was not a coincidence or a product of mere intellectual curiosity from nowhere. It was a part of the implementation of the Hailey recommendations as well as the changing political and economic circumstances that impacted the West after the bruising World War II. Baring the rising social costs of empire in the post-1945 era, Africa remained the economic backbone of the West either via direct colonial plunder or through a neo-colonial option for those states that were better decolonised. For this reason, greater and deeper knowledge of the continent was important politically and economically to the coloniser even at a time colonialism was in question. We will quickly examine the situation of African studies elsewhere before the 1950s.

In the United States of America before the 1950s, initial studies of and about Africa and Africans was triggered by a different impulse from that of England. It began as a part of the broader struggle of the racially oppressed black Americans whose struggle for freedom got them to think more seriously about pan-Africanist ideas, building on collective emancipatory histories of the Haitian Revolution (a testimony of the capacity of the slaves to free themselves and fight for a just society) and also drawing inspiration from popular revolutions elsewhere, such as the French revolution and also the American civil war of 1861-65. They also wrote about ancient African kingdoms, to vindicate their claims of Africa's sophisticated ancient state system, and by extension, shatter the myth of black incapacity. As pointed out by William Martin and Michael West, these scholars and general writers operated in the 'vindicationist tradition', which originated in "... attempts by black intellectuals, writers, pamphleteers, and memorialists to vindicate Africa and Africans, to defend them against their traducers in Europe and the Americas who hurled calumnies about 'Dark Africa' devoid of history and culture. In short, vindicationism was a project to negate the 'whiting out' of the African past."<sup>13</sup> Emerging in the early 1900s from newly found black universities after the American civil war, many self-trained historians promoted these 'vindicationist' ideas. Professional historians such as Carter G. Woodson, who was not in the university system, founded in 1915 the Association for the Study of the Negro (now Afro-American) Life and History. This became a key USA organisation to study Afro-American issues. This association and other published a number of prominent journals such as *Journal of Negro History*, the *Journal of Negro Education*, *Phylon*, and the *Negro History Bulletin* which popularised African and Afro-American issues in the USA. Related to these were the works of W.E.B. Du Bois who wrote the *Encyclopaedia Africana* (1930s).<sup>14</sup> These early African experts worked hard to promote early forms of African studies without government financial support and under serious opposition, deep cynicisms, and a complete lack of support from a later generation of Africanists chiefly Melville Herskovits who in 1958 became the first president of the newly founded African Studies Association and William Brown another ASA founding fellow, a founder of the Boston University's African Studies Centre and the third president of the ASA.<sup>15</sup> These Africanists delegitimised early black

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<sup>13</sup> William G. Martin and Michael O. West, 'The Ascent, Triumph, and Disintegration of the Africanist Enterprise, USA', in William G. Martin and Michael O. West (eds), *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1999, pp. 85-122.

<sup>14</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', p. 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', p. 88-89.

Americans' scholarship, arising and profiting from this fight to be recognised as the godfathers of African studies in the USA. Zeleza sees these new Africanists as having replaced the old Afro-American Studies with 'Euro-American African Studies', not due to any intellectual superiority, but due to significant financial advantage and the patronage of the American federal regime. By their claim to (the yet untested) objectivity and their unwillingness to embrace the work of Afro-American scholars, these Africanists lost an opportunity to operate beyond scientific racism that characterise white Americans' relationship with 'native Americans'.<sup>16</sup> Armed with significant funding from the Ford, Carnegie, Mellon and Rockefeller foundations and state support, these new Africanists and the ASA rose rapidly, growing fast in membership as well as founding a number of new, key journals such as the *African Studies Bulletin* (now *African Studies Review*) in 1958, *African Historical Studies* (now the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* in 1968, and *Research in African Literature* in 1970.<sup>17</sup> With lots of money, the earliest founders of African Studies in America functioned as gatekeepers controlling who gets admitted to membership of the ASA by setting up the criteria for membership. They were blatantly racist, and their first ASA Board only had one black person, Franklin Frazier out of eight members. The fractured foundations of the ASA led to representations in 1968 by the Black Caucus who questioned the lack of inclusivity in the ASA, its relevance to African studies, its competence to understand and deal with the issues facing black people globally, as well as its failure to rapidly develop African-American studies in the USA and to be critical of popular racism in the USA.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of African Studies in the USA was a part of the USA's political project to dominate global affairs since World War 2. African studies were linked to researches of other minorities, especially Afro-Americans – and more popular studies in that time focussed on issues of slave trade, slavery and freedom as well as critical social anthropologies of peasant production and political processes in Africa. These research issues were spurred, in one way by the demands of 'radical' leftist white liberal scholars who believed, at least in theory, in the notion of democracy and the regime of rights as well as by the agenda of the USA whose imperialist position in Africa required them to 'know' the African more closely.

**Knowing the 'other' was important for neo-colonial domination.** Thus, significant amount of money from foundations and the USA government was poured into African studies centres which opened at a number of American universities.<sup>19</sup> African studies of this kind was a part of an imperialist agenda and it containerised knowledge production *about* Africa, and not necessarily *for* Africa. Africa was a living laboratory for testing theories and ideas of

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<sup>16</sup> Paul T. Zeleza, 'Reckoning With the Past and Reimagining the Futures of African Studies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', Africa Peacebuilding Network Lecture Series No. 4, Keynote Address at the Social Science Research Council Training Workshop, United States International University- Africa, Nairobi, January 7, 2019, p. 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', p. 89-90.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Allman, ASA President Jean Allman's 2018 Presidential Lecture, [#HerskovitsMustFall?](#) A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968, 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the ASA, held at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, USA, Nov. 29-Dec. 1, 2018, at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSb\\_N2Ly8VY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSb_N2Ly8VY) last accessed 19 October 2019. For a more extensive coverage of the Black Caucus of 1968, see Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', pp. 97-106

<sup>19</sup> Roquinaldo Ferreira, 'The institutionalization of Africa Studies in the United States', p. 71-88.

society as well as an arena in which Cold War propaganda played itself in the academia, particularly to outdo the influence of Marxist and Communist writings that were gaining intellectual gravitas and spurring guerrilla and other emerging radical nationalist movements on the continent. American funders such as the Ford Foundation blatantly supported the American government's onslaught against global communism, strongly encouraging the institutions that they funded to strive to promote "human progress" in the face of "... the deadly threat to any hope of human progress posed by wars and communism,". The Carnegie Foundation viewing the role of the University as that of executing America's international relations and as an instrument for American policy making.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence from a key study of the Africanist enterprise in the USA points to the **hidden political connections of some of the leading American Africanists to the USA's politicians, military, and state security agencies including the CIA.** Martin and West argue that the CIA secretly funded the African American Institute and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Using secret correspondences as their sources, they found that the meetings and design of the ASA were initiated, planned and secretly supported by the CIA. For this reason, a letter from Herskovits to the director of the CIA indicated that the ASA and its network of scholars "...would be happy to aid you in any way it can."<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the development of African studies in the USA and England was dominated by historians, in France the story was different as anthropology, particularly ethnography dominated their contribution to African studies, especially building on strong ethnographic work of Jules Ferry who established the Museum of Ethnography in France in 1880s, a moment of French colonial expansion.<sup>22</sup> Although an Institute of Ethnology was founded at the University of Paris in 1925, it was only in 1930 that the Society of Africanists was founded as the first French professional association that focussed on Africa, six years after the British International African Institute was founded. It is from the work of these ethnographers and linguists that anthropology was born as a discipline in the 1950s, popularised by George Balandier and some young Marxist-oriented scholars of his time whose dominant focus was the political anthropology of kinships and inequality as well as modes of production.<sup>23</sup> It was believed that there was nothing modern to study in Africa; that there were no written historical records for African history to be studied and that there was no modern society to study sociologically as well as economically and legally.<sup>24</sup> **As a discipline, anthropology focussed on studying the other. To use Coquery-Vidrovitch's term, the discipline suffered from its 'exoticism'. It was not surprising that structuralists like Levi Strauss insisted on examining and differentiating the 'vibrant' structures of 'modern' societies contrasted to the 'cold', 'savage', and 'archaic' societies.**<sup>25</sup> For this

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<sup>20</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', p. 91-92, also 97.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The Rise of Francophone African Social Science: From Colonial Knowledge to Knowledge of Africa', in William G. Martin and Michael O. West (eds), *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1999, 39-53.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The Rise of Francophone Social Science' p. 40-41.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The Rise of Francophone Social Science' p. 42043.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The Rise of Francophone Social Science' p. 42.



reason, it is not surprising that the language of 'tradition' (as in stuck in the past, or refusing to be modern) acquires normativity when used to describe and explain something African. The same word is barely used to explain European cultures and historical practices because the former are thought to be archaic and potentially mythical, and the later modern and verifiable.

There was very limited research by French scholars in Africa during the rest of the colonial era, and even after political decolonisation. Moreover, the French did very little to educate black Africans in their colonies, relative to the British. Before the decolonisation, only one French teaching university existed, and that was in Dakar, Senegal so much that before the 1970s, there were only a handful of Francophone African graduates, among them Cheikh Anta Diop (1955) and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, an African historian of the 1970s, both of whom focussed on nation building issues. There was a belated growth of French speaking African scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of historians such as Mamadou Diouf and a well-known philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe who were trained in France.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, African studies in Francophone Africa are relatively new, and its African scholars are yet to be taken seriously by their French counterparts and their writings barely promoted in French publishing houses.

#### [Crisis in African Studies and Resuscitations, the 1970s onward:](#)

In the section above, we reflected on the emergence and evolution of African studies in Britain, USA and France from the earlier periods to the 1960s. Despite the limitations and inherent epistemic and political issues in the idea of African studies as established in those countries, the knowledge of Africa generated by Africanists in the West and by the academic Chairs in Africa (especially chairs in African history) since the 1960s have been foundational to African studies. That scholarship equipped us with knowledge of the histories of Great ancient kingdoms, their political organisations, African precolonial religions practices, economics, art and to some extent Afro-aesthetics. BUT, this was not enough as this corpus of work served mainly to prove that Africa had a great history, social and political institutions and leadership comparable to the West relative to their pasts. This was a usable past that gave much ammunition to the African nationalist movement, but it had no relevance beyond the post-independence euphoria.<sup>27</sup> There remained many issues that these scholars did not examine – and in fact this had much to do with the general lack of cooperation between Africanists and the rising new African scholars, predominantly based on the continent. Africans worked mainly as informants, interpreters, or transcribers of what were regarded as 'African oral traditions'. Africans had no say in the way Africa was portrayed in the final manuscripts and could not contribute to the theoretical lenses within which their societies were examined. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was rare to find any

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The Rise of Francophone Social Science' pp. 45-50.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold Temu and Bornaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique – Post-Colonial Historiography Examined*, Zed Press, London, 1981, p. 63.

collaborative work between Africanists and African post-graduate students and the new scholars that were joining the universities as members of staff. For this reason, the writing of African history mirrored the agenda of the Africanists and their funders, not the interests of those whose histories were being written.

As correctly pointed out by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, **“Africans always appeared as nothing more than a testing site for theories manufactured in the western academies.”** He continues, **“In the 1960s, modernization was all the rage, then it was dependency theory at the turn of the 1970s, soon followed by modes of production, and since the mid-1980s Africa has been analysed through the unrelieved gloom of ‘Afropessimism’ or the depolitized posturings of post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-coloniality, and the other post prisons.”**<sup>28</sup> This did not help but perpetuated Africa’s isolation and positioning as ‘the other’, a subject, imagined, misrepresented willy-nilly, and by a lack of funding, stripped of the power to speak back. Where African scholars have tried to speak back and critique glaring misrepresentations of realities that they live with every day, they are muted out either by a lack of print capitalism, or by the stroke of the editors and violent reviewers of journals that are predominantly located in the Global North. This is not to say that Africans could not publish and that they didn’t. Many of them published, but they struggled to decolonise “... Eurocentric epistemology that has dominated the construction and organisation of knowledge in the colonial and postcolonial world...”<sup>29</sup> There is therefore need to do more work to deliberately break the knowledge divide as well as to **study Africa as a global player with its agency, capacities, and futures that lie beyond their colonial antecedents.** The work of archaeologists and historical linguistics is but one example of work that will help us revisit the pasts.

African studies followed or at least mirrored the perceived changes happening in Africa socially, politically and economically after independence. In the 1970s, African import substitution industries were severely depressed mainly due to the oil crisis and to the high production costs as well as international competition. This triggered waves of political unrests, coups and military rule, and to some dictatorships as the new leaders tried to quell unrests. This further damaged the fragile African economies.<sup>30</sup> The downward trend continued in the 1980s and were exacerbated by the IMF and World Bank structural adjustments and the associated conditions.<sup>31</sup> In the face of these realities, nationalist historiography slowly lost its relevance as it got eclipsed by explanations that sought to understand Africa’s developmental crisis. Thus a new crop of scholars focussing on blaming

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*, CODESRIA, Dakar, 1997, p. ii.

<sup>29</sup> Zeleza, ‘The Disciplining of Africa’, p. 29. See also P.T. Zeleza, ‘Reckoning With the Past and Reimagining the Futures of African Studies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, Africa Peacebuilding Network Lecture Series No. 4, Keynote Address at the Social Science Research Council Training Workshop, United States International University-Africa, Nairobi, January 7, 2019, pp. 1-20.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Enocent Msindo, ‘Post-Colonial Africa and the West’, in Toyin Falola and Martin Shanguhya (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, Vol. 2, Macmillan, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 759-84.

<sup>31</sup> T. Mkandawire, ‘30 Years of African Independence: The Economic Experience,’ in P. A. Nyongó, (ed), *30 Years of Independence in Africa: the loss decades?*, Academy Science Publishers, Nairobi, 1992, 86-102; Adebayo. O. Olukoshi, ‘The elusive Prince of Denmark: Structural Adjustment and the Crisis of Governance in Africa’, in T. Mkandawire and C. C. Soludo (eds), *African Voices on Structural Adjustment*, Africa World Press, Trenton, 2003, 229-73.

Africa's crisis on underdevelopment and on neo-colonialist dependency arose.<sup>32</sup> The works of Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Paul Baran, Paul Sweeny, Andre Gunder Frank and others come to mind. None of these went any further in terms of analysing African agency, at least at a local level. Their concern was with the global processes and their impact on Africa. It is called the world systems approach.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, there were attempts to examine African social and political history with emphasis on issues of identities, political cultures, civil society, service delivery and so on. These issues were however addressed in the context of the vicious state characterised by state collapse, misrule and so on. This is not to say that African writers in Africa were not aware of these issues. African scholars had long written about these issues decades ago, for instance, Ngugi wa Thiongo (1967) about militant peasants; Ousmane Sembene (1960 and 1980) on restive workers; the economic and cultural hollowness of modernisation (Chinua Achebe, 1963); strong critiques of nationalism by Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* and others.<sup>33</sup> However, African scholars did not believe that the state in Africa was beyond repair, save that they were signalling the need for serious and sustainable transformation. All we are saying here is that the interventions of Afro-pessimists were both a convenient rejoinder and an assault on the nationalist historiography and the neo-Marxists of the development and underdevelopment school. Afro-pessimism became an important standpoint in the majority of Africanist scholarship particularly because it ignored the legacies of colonialism and the ills of neoliberalism, whose entities funded the same institutions and the very Africanists who have to study Africa today. It was a form of covert eurocentrism that essentialised, generalised, and vulgarised the Third World. The notions of disorder as a political instrument, the idea of the criminalised state, the concept of the gatekeeper state, analysis of the political elite, the abuse of identity politics, and so on became typical issues for African studies because they all justified the positions of the afro-pessimists. It is this focus on Afro-pessimism in contemporary Africanist scholarship and the associated marginalisation of African scholars in the West that created fertile ground for its nemesis: the idea of Afrocentrism.

**Between the 1970s and the 1990s, in Africa, universities suffered multiple crises** – the increasing control by new dictatorial political elites who wanted to curtail dissent and the economic crisis following the global rise in oil prices and the failure of structural adjustments. Consequently, many African scholars left African universities to join the ones in the West at a time the universities should have consolidated. African universities struggled to fund research and to buy library books, let alone to subscribe to journals which were published in the West. Many of the African scholars were absorbed into the American universities and elsewhere where dominant strands of African studies were still strong. They became refugees, academically, politically and socially – and were often not on the same footing as the Africanists who were citizens, had access to research grants, generous working conditions, tenure, and other goodies in their motherlands.<sup>34</sup> **Ironically, the**

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<sup>32</sup> Temu and Swai, *Historians and Africanist History*, pp. 74-77.

<sup>33</sup> Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies*, p. 427-35.

<sup>34</sup> Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies*, pp. 11-21; 24-42.

**relocation of Africans to the USA happened at a time when the USA was rethinking its support for African studies.** The end of the cold war, the Federal government's own financial crisis, the overinvestment in the military as well as the failure of their neoliberal policies, the limited economic growth in Africa, "fell off the policy map" of the USA, as well as that of the funding organisations, bringing area studies in a crisis.<sup>35</sup> African studies had to be re-imagined by attracting senior scholars from the African continent to USA to revitalise African studies. Institutions also employed many young Afro-American scholars who would help bridge the divide between Africa and the Afro-American studies. This put the old gatekeeping Africanists in a crisis. As that wave of new Africans and African Americans filled positions in the USA, P. D. Curtin, wrote the most irresponsible piece, 'Ghettoizing African History' in the widely read *Chronicle of Higher Education* of March 1995, lamenting "the growing numbers of Africans and African Americans teaching African history in American universities and the subsequent 'lowering' of scholarly standards."<sup>36</sup> This was a blatant affirmation of the long held belief that Africanists (of the ASA) were guardians of quality and was a sad reminder of the racism that associated with the ASA since its foundations. Afrocentrism, which initially emerged in the late 1960s with the split of Black scholars from the ASA to form a black only African Heritage Studies Association, but was later popularised in the 1980s in Martin Bernal's 1987 *Black Athena*<sup>37</sup> was revived in response to this racism and continued conservatism of the ASA at a time the demographics of the association were slowly shifting. Afrocentrism went into overdrive and consequently blurred the dividing lines of myth and reality in their attempt to affirm the primacy of African civilisations and notions of black pride. This 'vindicationist' approach did not provide a more cogent intellectual critique to the limitations of the earlier, arrogant Africanists especially in the USA. The untested, and sometimes patently false assumptions of some of the Afrocentric writers gave ammunition to Africanists who were keen to attack them.<sup>38</sup>

### African Studies Now: What Shall We do?

Below, I profer some thoughts about what we must do, going forward. These ideas are tentative. I also do not claim that they are entirely novel or that they are not potentially problematic. They are rather important discussion points.

#### **i. Strengthen alternative forms of publishing and South-South Collaborations –**

By the 1990s, there was significant body of research and publications that African scholars in Africa and globally had contributed in every field, but interestingly, in many American institutions, as in most parts of the Global North, Africanists remained stuck in self-affirmations and barely referenced the body of work produced by Africans on the continent,

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<sup>35</sup> Martin and West, 'Ascent, Triumph and Disintegration', pp. 106-110.

<sup>36</sup> Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies*, p. i.

<sup>37</sup> See generally, Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagines Homes*, Verso, London, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, Basic Books, New York, 1996.

or even their own African colleagues in the same institutions.<sup>39</sup> Peer reviewers for journals in the Global North usually emphasise the need to quote works that have been published in the Global North, at times including unpublished, and yet inaccessible Masters and PhD theses. **An honest exchange of ideas will happen when western print capitalism and the digital divide are broken.** This will enable for equal information exchange. There will be a need to explore cost effective and alternative models of online publishing across collaborative institutions until that become a global phenomenon. This requires significant state and corporate support for affordable electronic publishing.

- ii. **Strengthen interdisciplinarity** : - It is not our intention to kill or weaken disciplines, because they are important in providing guild knowledge of a specialized nature. However, approaches and findings from specialized disciplines need to be triangulated with those from other disciplines. We must be open to possibilities of scientific studies of water and environmental change in the natural sciences, for instance, to connect strongly with humanistic scientific studies of water governance issues, environmental law and environmental activism. Studies of mobility in the humanities disciplines will need to be tied to technology studies and the mobilities of invention (I use this phrase to mean progressive 'movement'/change or innovation impacting technologies) and the kind of social change that this engenders in Africa and globally. How, for instance will African people practice farming in the future? What technology will they use to plant, to predict rainfall, to utilise less water and to recycle. How will that technological change impact on their food security, cultures of work and labour, religious practices as well as how will that place Africa within the global family of nations? If an expert of identity studies chooses not to embrace language studies to help him/her in discussing identity, for instance, how will the language of identity and identity politics itself be deciphered?
- iii. **Break the Area Studies divide** - There is need to increase comparative studies that cut across not only disciplinary boundaries but also the limitations of area studies and national borders. Some of this is now happening in comparative literature, history, sociology of work and in political science. More must still be done. We have to break with traditional notions of state sovereignty, which even permeates research by reducing each country into a distinct research zone – a rigid unit of study – isolated from the neighbouring country through immigration controls and the challenges of obtaining research permits for African scholars when they want to apply for research permits to study related societies that are merely a hundred metres across the river, in the neighbouring country.

Moreover because of **the lack of funds for slow research, experts usually focus their research in a small village, or at best, a ward, and barely a district. Due to the fact that most contemporary researchers are not working in teams, their findings are rarely integrated for data to be compared and generalised to enable deeper theoretical insights to be drawn.** This is inexcusable in our era

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<sup>39</sup> Paul T. Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies*, p. ii.

where information is now easier to share than before. But I suggest here that the problem we are dealing with here is a historical one. First, the University in Africa, like its education system in general, emerged as a part of the colonial 'civilising mission'. They produced knowledge primarily for the colonial metropole. Information was gathered from the colonies (the periphery) to the centre (the colonisers' administrative headquarters). Each of the universities emerged with a strong but self-destructive notion of institutional autonomy to the extent that they barely spoke to their institutional neighbour, which was and is seen as a competitor. Therefore, until more recently, institutional collaborations and resource sharing within the country and within the continent have not been strong enough. Secondly, the traditional research approaches that we inherited from colonial scholars was that of country or area experts. It needs to be broken down by a more dynamic collaboration that enable for greater comparative insights to be drawn. The proliferation of edited books has partly helped with this, but there is more work to be done and it requires consolidated funding and prolonged in-depth studies. CODESRIA has tried, but is limited due to the enormity of the problem and its lack of fairer geographical spread and influence across the continent.

- iv. **Strengthen multi-lingualism as a tool for increased knowledge access.** Explore more prospects for multi-lingual publishing. Recent initiatives by mainly language scholars of East Africa to publish a journal volume in KiSwahili is highly appreciated. Such initiatives must be explored elsewhere in a manner that could minimise the divide between Francophone Africa and Anglophone Africa, for instance. This will strengthen information sharing and increase our comparative element in our studies of Africa. Due to language and other barriers, there is limited engagement between scholars in 'Francophone Africa' and those in 'Anglophone Africa'. These islands (which mirror parochial, but real language barriers; varied perception of what knowledge is and what it is not, as well as parochial nationalisms deprive scholarship on the continent of self-reflexivity to critique the values of their knowledge and the dangers of intellectual isolation.
  
- v. **Curriculum transformation/Retooling the Curriculum** – During the recent students' protests in South Africa and at Oxbridge Universities about curriculum transformation and the banishment of the cult of Rhodes via #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, students questioned the content and ideological foundations of some of the conventional African studies courses and the relevance of a predominantly Western undergraduate curricula in general. In 2015, the Black Student Movement (BSM) at Rhodes University spent six months physically occupying the Council Chamber of the university, rendering it impossible to conduct regular university meetings in there.<sup>40</sup> In addition to many issues they raised about the plight of black students and the issue of fee increases in a historically white university, the BSM also spoke to issues of curriculum

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<sup>40</sup> Brad Dennett, 'Rhodes University: A demand for transformation', *Mail and Guardian*, 09 Sep 2015, at <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-09-09-rhodes-university-a-demand-for-transformation/> accessed 20 October 2019.

transformation, demanding that it be Africanised.<sup>41</sup> Sequel to those concerns, and that of the #FeesMustFall a year later, the institution, through the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning called for academic departments to evaluate their curriculum and indicate what their plans were regarding curriculum transformation. The efficacy of that call is yet to be determined and the extent of curriculum transformation is still in question as very little, if anything changed. Recently, Masters students in African Studies at the University College of London between 2017 and 2019 experienced what they viewed as, “numerous challenges related to the structure, content, and ways in which Africa was taught at UCL.” They wrote an open letter where they questioned, “Where is the ‘African’ in African Studies”, requesting to have the African studies course relate to lived African realities. **They wanted the course to centre Africa**, and to be corrected of its strong Eurocentric bias. The three women who wrote the letter also complained about the lack of gender sensitivity in course content which is presented from a strongly white male standpoint, which silences the voices of the oppressed. They called for the hiring of tutors from diverse backgrounds, for the instructors to be empathetic, for teachers to be politically conscious and relevant, to allow for diverse African voices, and to centre ‘the African’ in African studies. For this, they argued that the department dismissed their concerns, hence the open letter.<sup>42</sup> The reason for citing these two examples is to make one point: **the mere fact that we teach and research on African studies does not affirm us as ideologically transformed. What is important is what fundamental positions do we hold about the continent? To what extent are our Africanists in the Global North and in historically white universities** in some parts of Africa willing to be empathetic in their teaching and writing of African studies? It does seem to be that the recent call by Jean Allman at the 2018 ASA Conference was on point. **Curriculum transformation is however impeded by the fact that the dominant work has been done by Africanists, many of whom are located in deep Afro-pessimism.** Reading from this kind of literature, one would teach Africa as a site of despair; a haven of corrupt individuals and entities; a place where the multiple crises are seen as endogenous and self-inflicted, etc. The tendency is to understand Africa with a focus on its shortcomings, hence the focus on ‘the state’, ‘violence and civil wars’, the notion of ‘state collapse’, etc.<sup>43</sup> This is deliberate and serves the changing Western interests on Africa and perpetuates the neo-colonial model by creating the impression that Africa is incapable of self-governance and that its institutions will not work without external interventions and monitoring. Just over a decade ago, I inherited a course that was traditionally taught from a strongly Afropessimist stance that portrayed the continent as a hopeless space of despair. The same approach was common in many of the undergraduate courses

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<sup>41</sup> See generally the BSM Facebook page at, <https://www.facebook.com/blackstudentsmovement/> accessed 20 October 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Jesutofunmi Odugbemi, Orapeleng Rammala, and Wangui wa Kamonji, ‘Searching for Africa in African Studies: An open letter to the teachers of Africa at UCL’, 29 July 2019, at <https://medium.com/@jodugb/searching-for-africa-in-african-studies-an-open-letter-to-teachers-of-africa-at-ucl-29a3a9d20eee> last accessed 20 October 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Sally Matthews, ‘Reflections on Teaching Africa in South Africa’, *Politics*, Vol. 36, 4, 2016, pp. 467-81.

on African studies at a number of USA institutions in the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> At my institution, students voiced about how depressing the issues of Africa were and they were beginning to wonder whether it was worthwhile studying Africa anyway. The member of staff who used to teach it justified this pessimism and thought that students were in fact interested in learning about this as it simply reflected the realities of the world they lived in anyway. I had to revamp the course to enable for a more nuanced approach that made it possible for students to become more critical and to appreciate a multiplicity of perspectives. A common problem was the lack of sufficient literature to show the other side. The works of UNESCO through its UNESCO General History of Africa was a good initiative, but it was not continued after the end of the UNESCO sponsorship. CODESRIA also did a great work in the 1990s, but that revolution in African scholars did not continue at the same level because of many factors, including insufficient financial support. I had to start sourcing works from a few scholars from the continent as well as write two chapters provoking a debate by writing from the other side of the debate.<sup>45</sup> BUT, without consolidated efforts and collaboration, we will not go far with our efforts. Retooling of humanities researching Africa will not happen without a transformed curriculum that will enable students to think more critically, and to affirm their agency in solving problems on the continent.

- vi. **Expose scholars and students to a multiplicity of knowledge sources – a multiplicity of libraries.** What we need is not a mere reactive jettisoning of the colonial library and its ideational package for African Studies is not a call to parochialisms, but to developing a global citizen whose knowledge of Africa is more sophisticated and more nuanced. The recent debates on decoloniality and the MustFall movements in South Africa and in the UK have been devoid of empirical substance particularly of the experiences of African studies from elsewhere on the continent decades before new South Africa was born. At the heart of the activism was a genuine and deep desire to do something new in the humanities. The assumption was that it would only happen when the old is jettisoned. This is however limited in that **Africa has a multiplicity of libraries (read to mean knowledge bases and intellectual monopolies) and that the Eurocentric one is just of them.** As Tiyambe Zeleza argues, **“A project that seeks to liberate African knowledge must begin by understanding the variety, development, and intersections of Africa’s multiple libraries. It must go beyond Afrocentric injunctions of proclaiming Africa’s eternal differences and recognize the enduring and complex conversations of cultures and ideas within Africa itself and between the continent’s societies and civilisations and those of other**

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<sup>44</sup> Joel Samoff, ‘Triumphalism, Tarzan and Other Influences: Teaching About Africa in the 1990s,’ in Patricia Alden, David Lloyd and Ahmed I. Samatar (eds), *African Studies and the Undergraduate Curriculum*, Lynne Rynner Publishers, Boulder, 1994, pp. 35-83.

<sup>45</sup> Enocent Msindo, ‘Colonial Africa and the West’ and ‘Postcolonial Africa and the West’, in Martin Shanguhya and Toyin Falola (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, Vols. 1 and Vol. 2, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2018, pp. 535-50 and pp. 759-84 respectively.



**continents beyond Europe.**<sup>46</sup> Zeleza here envisions African studies as first pan-African, and then as global, not solely as about Afro-European relations, but also as encompassing Africa's interactions with Chinese, Indians and Afro-Christian, Afro-Islamic worlds. **He asks a question that we can't fully answer at this stage, but one that we must contemplate in our conversations going forward,** "What will this library look like in the era of big science and the digitization of knowledge, work, social life,; an era of artificial intelligence, the internet of things, robotics, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and so on?"<sup>47</sup>

- vii. **Mentoring and nurturing early careers:** The bulk of published books on Africa are from the Global North. This is due to insufficient nurturing and mentoring of black early career scholars across the continent. There is a generation that has been left in Africa to shoulder the burdens of teaching and research in Africa. Many experienced early black scholars have operated in silos and have not opened up to the younger ones to train and give them sufficient guild knowledge beyond the PhDs. Invariably, a new PhD graduate is nothing more than a person who has focused on a particular problem. Such a person still needs time to work closely with elders in the discipline. But are those elders available to nurture, or rather they see new PhD graduates as competitors?

What I have brought to you are preliminary thoughts on what we must do, it is something to ponder.

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<sup>46</sup> Paul T. Zeleza, 'Reckoning With the Past and Reimagining the Futures of African Studies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', Africa Peacebuilding Network Lecture Series No. 4, Keynote Address at the Social Science Research Council Training Workshop, United States International University- Africa, Nairobi, January 7, 2019, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.20