

Reclaiming

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through African Perspectives

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Chapter Fifty-three

WHAT IS 'AFRICAN STUDIES'? AFRICAN SCHOLARS, AFRICANIST SCHOLARS, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Olúfêmi Táíwò

Introduction

Knowledge, like most phenomena in our world, is a product. It is implicated within the larger modes of production (material and social) where most artificial creation takes place. Its manufacture mirrors that of the production of material things and social relations. Just as we speak of modes of production of material things and social relations, we can also speak of modes of knowledge production, where the products are either commodities or social relations.¹ The idea of knowledge as a product specific to a mode of production is not new. Except in the infancy of the human race—when our understanding of our species and of the world we inhabit was rudimentary, the division of labour was crude, and there was little or no social differentiation—the production and subsequently the distribution, consumption, and exchange of knowledge, have always been carefully organised and embodied in various structures.

Just like the modes of production of material things and social processes, modes of knowledge production (MOKPs for short) are, at the present time, circumscribed by geopolitical boundaries. This is not to suggest that two or more countries may not share the same modes of production including knowledge production. Quite the contrary: conquered countries usually become subordinate parts of conquering countries and their productivity becomes subsumed by their conqueror's. Additionally, modes of production characterise entire epochs defined not by geographical, racial or other boundaries, but by how, why, and what is produced, as well as by whom. Countries that are instances

1. I have discussed this in fuller detail in Táíwò (1993). "Colonialism and Its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production," *Callaloo* 16 (4): 891-908.

of one mode of production are likely to share more traits in common than those within which there are radically different modes of producing things, relations, and knowledge. Between a mode of production and an MOKP, there is a symbiotic relationship. The outline of the production, consumption, distribution, and exchange of knowledge is generally determined by the mode of production dominant in a given society. Thus, given that the American MOKP is an aspect of the capitalist mode of production dominant in the United States, it is not an accident that knowledge produced in that country embodies various values convergent with late-capitalism. Although most countries often have a plurality of modes of production within their borders, one type or a combination of types is dominant. Modes of knowledge production follow this pattern as well. For example, in the United States, even though capitalist rules guide the interlinked processes of knowledge production for the most part, there are schools, research institutions, think-tanks, religious bodies, media houses, etc, that are recognised as non-profit concerns and are, for that reason, shielded from the pressures of standard capitalist transactions. And, of course, there are countries in which it is fair to say that there is a jumble of MOKPs with no single one being dominant and with all sorts of deleterious consequences for the countries concerned.²

In this chapter I propose to examine knowledge production in African Studies understood as an integral part of the MOKPs domiciled in the United States of America and, to a lesser extent, in Canada. This characterisation immediately suggests many problems that demand clarification, if not solution. How can 'African Studies' be an integral part of a mode of knowledge production specific to the United States or Canada in particular? After all, it may be pointed out, we have people engaged in African Studies in Nigeria, Ghana, Sweden, Japan, Russia, and China. Are we to understand African Studies in each of these countries as integral aspects of their respective MOKPs? If yes, then we must be willing to identify American 'African Studies', Chinese 'African Studies', Swedish 'African Studies', *ad infinitum*. On the face of it, this is absurd. For surely 'African Studies' is African Studies regardless of where it is done and by whom. But only if one embraces a simplistic notion of 'African Studies' would this reaction seem plausible. On a more complex and complete understanding, the matter is not so simple. 'African Studies' may mean one or more of the following:

1. studies of African phenomena undertaken by whoever desires to study such things for whatever reason;
2. studies of anything undertaken by Africans wherever they happen to be;
3. studies of any subject-matter informed by an African point of view, sensibility, etc;
4. studies of African phenomena undertaken by Africans with a view to self-understanding, improvement of Africa, and within African institutions.

² For details of one instance of such kind see Táiwò (1993) as cited above.

If (1) is meant, then it wouldn't matter where the studying takes place—so long as the subject matter is 'African', it is African Studies. But then the question of how we are to understand 'African' will arise. If (2), we would end up with very loose boundaries indeed. For Physics, no less than History, will be part of African Studies. (3) depends on our ability to divine or define 'an African sensibility'. (4) has its own set of problems. For when African scholars do what is intimated in (4), they do not understand themselves as doing 'African Studies'; rather they are doing History, Geography, Economics, and so on. On this conception, they reserve 'African Studies' for interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary specialisations often conducted at the post-graduate level. I have never heard of an African Studies undergraduate major in any African university. One explanation for this absence is that at the undergraduate level, *all* studies undertaken in Africa presumably are African studies. If the system is properly organised and focussed, students anywhere presume self-understanding and understanding of their immediate communities—and, by extension, all of humanity—as the chief objects of their scholarly exertions in their various disciplines.

There may be other construals of 'African Studies' that have been left out of our brief taxonomy. The object in this section has not been to settle the question of what African Studies is or what the label means; rather this is a heuristic exercise to show the merit of identifying African Studies as an aspect of a specific mode of knowledge production, in this case the American one. For by so doing, we can see how the general aims and concerns of the mode of knowledge production, of which African Studies is a sub-specie, frames the latter's regional aims and goals, and how such concerns—different as they often are from those of other regional MOKPs and their respective 'African Studies'—may help us comprehend the divergences between African Studies as understood and prosecuted in the United States and the studies of African phenomena undertaken by, say, Nigerians.³ The tensions that result from these divergences, the mutual suspicion and incomprehension that follow in their wake—especially as the latter occur in the present historical conjuncture—comprise the focus of this chapter.

Studies about Africans but not for Africans

By knowledge production in African Studies conducted in the United States of America and Canada, I mean to include American and Canadian scholars of all shades and hues as well as immigrant scholars, whencesoever they have come, who have settled professionally in North America. Their knowledge production activities are driven of course by the need to know Africa. Yet 'the need to know Africa' may itself be motivated by a variety of factors. For those scholars who engage in African Studies *per se* we can cite, among several other motivations, personal advancement in their academic careers, political interest, even irrational fascination with the subject-matter of Africa, with Africans, and their

³ [Biodun Jeyifo undertakes a parallel exposé and analysis of contrasting interpretations of 'Africanness' depicted through significantly contrasting interpretations of a single African dramatic work at home and abroad, in Chapter 73 of this volume.—Ed.]

world. For the motivations of foundations, governments, and other agencies that fund the production of knowledge in African Studies, we may refer to their interest in knowing the terrain of Africa in order to help ease America's or Canada's relations to, or friendship with, or exploitation of, Africa and its inhabitants. For the schools and allied institutions that provide the bulk of the material structure of the MOKP in African Studies, we may cite their interest in advancing knowledge for disinterested reasons, attracting students to them, and generally providing first-rate liberal education for their enrollees.

Whatever their motivations in specific cases, one may surmise that in the United States of America, the structure, organisation, and central concerns of knowledge production in African Studies are decided and driven by the specific needs of American society, its academics, its academies, and other knowledge agents. Hence I argue: African Studies may be, and often is, *about* Africa, but it is definitely not *for* Africans—or at least, if it is, then not directly so. Nor, clearly, is African Studies in the USA produced by or near Africans. Drawing an analogy from debates in African-American Studies, if we were to subject African Studies to the four principles that W. E. B. DuBois identified for an African-American theatrical discourse that is dominated by whites, African Studies as a discipline will meet only one criterion: it is *about* Africans. According to Tejumola Olaniyan (1995: 21):

DuBois subsequently put forward an idea for a theatrical counterdiscourse, elaborating its four fundamental principles: About us; By us; For us; and Near us; principles that directly challenged the reigning fashion of 'Negro Theater' written and packaged by whites, and also the idea of audience and related theatrical success defined merely commercially, within the asphyxiating parameters of Broadway.

This conclusion provides the basic assumption on which my thesis is based.

One illustration of the contention that African Studies is inscribed within, and serves the purpose of, the American MOKP is the anthology *Africa and The Disciplines* (Robert H. Bates *et al* (eds) 1993). According to its editors, "the purpose of [this] volume can be portrayed . . . as an encounter" (Bates *et al* 1993: xi). The encounter is between a candidate for a faculty appointment and the "provost, dean, or departmental chair" who is interviewing the candidate. The candidate concerned "has conducted the bulk of her research in Africa" (p xii). Here are the two questions our imagined candidate and, by extension, African Studies, must answer: 'Given that resources are scarce and that I am trying to build a top-ranking department of economics, why should I invest in someone who works on Africa?' and 'What has been the contribution of research in Africa to this discipline?' The rest of the book represents the many-segmented answers to this question. On the one hand, both of these questions ask that African Studies justify its existence within the American MOKP, and on the other hand, both questions show why the concerns of African Studies should be recognised by the specific disciplines of humanities and social sciences. Hence the authors' efforts are to "trace the impact of the research in Africa on the core disciplines" and to show how "the study of Africa has shaped—and will shape—major fields of knowledge" (p. xi). So African Studies as a field of scholarship must show that it is worth the investment that the United States is called

upon to make in it; and Africa as a continent must show that its study deserves the badge of legitimacy in the disciplines.

Are these questions that would have occurred to African scholars? Would African scholars feel compelled to justify their study of Africa? Moreover, African scholars do not routinely—if indeed ever—conceive their study of Africa as being beyond the pale of the varied disciplines of research and letters. For them, Africa is not squatting outside of the disciplines begging or needing to be recognised as worthy of study. As I worked my way through the text, I kept wondering: what happened to the good old definition of a solid liberal education? Why do we need to provide special justification, besides what is readily supplied by the demands of a well-rounded education, for studying humanity wherever it happens to reside? Isn't the goal of tertiary training in the social sciences and humanities to create graduates who know as much as they can of as much as there is—to know of as many themes as are available for investigation?⁴

I shall argue in what follows that it is necessary to acknowledge African Studies as an integral element of the modes of knowledge production that characterise most scholarship and research in the United States and Canada, in order to situate accurately some of the contemporary controversies and peculiarities that one finds arising in the field. Our recognising that although African Studies is *about* Africa and Africans, it is not *for* Africans, *by* Africans, or *near* Africans, is fundamental to unravelling the many conundrums that Africans face when they have to work on African themes from inside the material structures of the American and Canadian modes of knowledge production. If I am right, then some of the solutions proposed to deal with these conundrums and dilemmas will no longer appear appropriate, given the peculiarly provincial location of African Studies and the genesis of its motivating factors.

I am not suggesting that because African Studies is the way that we have described it, therefore the knowledge that is produced by its workers may not be appropriated by Africans or disseminated to them. The claim I am making is more modest: I am saying that the production of African Studies is not determined by considerations of what is good for Africans—neither in terms of how they are represented in the discipline, nor in terms of what may eventually redound to a better understanding of (and improvement in) their situation. If this modest claim is accepted, it follows that African Studies in the United States of America or Canada is *sui generis*. This can be documented; and it is also easily explained. Because African Studies is framed by what redounds to the interests, concerns, and predilections of American and Canadian scholars (their funding agencies, educational organs, and other knowledge producing institutions). The themes that are

4 Another confirmation of the thesis of this chapter, which implicitly distinguishes the potentials for any study of Africa from 'African Studies', is to be found in the essays that make up the 1993 anthology mentioned here. The book should have been titled "Africanists and the Disciplines." For there is virtually no Africa in the book, only constructions of Africa served by the Africanists represented there, including a singular case of obscene self-promotion performed by Paul Collier in "Africa and the Study of Economics" (1995: 58-82). As a result, those who pick up the book hoping to find what Africa has contributed to the disciplines will be mightily disappointed. They will not come away with any sense of how Africa's engagement with the perennial problems of life has enriched the human experience and contributed to disciplinary discourse. The book demonstrates African Studies par excellence.

selected for study as well as the methods chosen, even the concepts that are deployed to make sense of the phenomena under study, reflect the peculiarities of their location.

'African' as different

Let us illustrate. A cult of difference dominates Africanist scholarship.⁵ African themes are always treated differently. Either because of a desire to exclude fellow native scholars from sharing expertise on Africa, or because of an overpowering inclination to appear original, a *sui generis* African Studies converges with a *sui generis* 'Africa' for which new concepts, new explanatory paradigms and vocabulary must always be invented. The consequence is that whatever new insights the study of Africa might have contributed to the disciplines broadly defined are obscured by the Africanists' celebration of their cult of difference and the consequent frightening off of uninitiated scholars from efforts at learning from Africa. I cite one example. In "The African Frontier for Political Science," Richard L. Sklar (1993: 83-110) lamented:

Few Africanists in the profession of political science are highly regarded for their ability to communicate to the heart of their discipline. By and large, Africanists in this discipline are esteemed mainly for their analyses of Africa's political experience. Their works are read by those who seek knowledge about Africa, itself, rather than knowledge of the discipline or its theory (Sklar 1993: 83).

Why is this so? Sklar gives various reasons. First, there is the snobbery of the majority of political scientists who "still classify research on African questions as a peripheral 'area study' which is not essential to the discipline's scientific progress" (1993: 84). His second reason refers to "the relative marginality of Africa itself to the mainstreams of economic, scientific, and technological intercourse among regions of the world" (1993: 83-84).⁶ He concludes: "On balance, however, Africa's own marginality to the mainstream of global exchanges is a professional liability" (1993: 85). Thus, as far as Sklar is concerned, the reason that African Studies does not command respect is to be found, on the one hand, in the snobbish attitudes of his fellow political scientists and, on the other, in Africa's purported marginality in world affairs. The fault is either his colleagues' or Africa's! Here is a classic case of dodging responsibility. It does not occur to Sklar that the problem might actually be traceable to the way that Africanists conduct the business of Africa in

5 I use 'Africanist' to designate the knowledge producers in African Studies as specified in the introduction to this chapter. This means that African nationals who are scholars may also fall under this category so that the critique offered here will apply with equal force to all those African scholars who—sometimes in sheer mimicry of their doctoral supervisors, or as a result of plain indolence, opportunism, or insecurity—produce knowledge respecting African phenomena deploying Africanist paradigms defined in North America. Hence the label 'Africanist' is not an *ad hominem*. It refers to the content and presuppositions of the product, not the personal or cultural identity of the producer.

6 [On the fallacy of treating Africa as economically marginalised, see Samir Amin's "The Use of False Concepts in the Conventional Discourse on Africa: is Africa Really Marginalised?" reprinted as the Appendix to his Chapter 20 of Volume I in this anthology.—Ed.]

North America. I say this because contained in Sklar's own paper, is the kernel of what arguably is a more plausible answer to the problem he identified. By not pursuing it he went on in the rest of his paper to replicate the style that has made African Studies such a bit player, if not a quaint presence, in the academic market. Here again is Sklar:

Can we, as Africanists, identify significant issues or tendencies in political behaviour that are more prominent and further developed in Africa than elsewhere in the modern world? Can we expunge the prejudicial premise of choice between disciplinary and cultural values by means of our discovery and exposition of particular aspects of African politics which will command broad attention for disciplinary reasons? Heretofore, the best-known and most carefully studied political problems in Africa *have not been specifically or generically African problems*. A representative list of such topics would include parasitic statism, militarism, dictatorship, public corruption, the insufficient accountability of public officials, ineffective political socialization, and differential incorporation of ethnic groups resulting in conflict, among many others (1993: 85, my emphasis).

Let us dwell momentarily on the italicised portion of the quoted passage. If the "political problems in Africa have not been specifically or generically African problems," then one must inquire how they *have* been studied by Africanists. The simple answer is that, seized by the cult of difference, Africanists have studied political and other problems in Africa as if they were specifically or generically *African* problems. The assertion that these are *not* specifically or generically African problems must represent a novel discovery for Mr. Sklar, for he and his fellow Africanists have spent their careers painting Africa into the 'different' box! How many of them have tried to understand the political problems in Africa in comparative terms? How many have tried consciously to identify parallels between Africa and Europe, Africa and North America, or Africa and Asia? To cite just one example: Most Africanists have failed to extend to their study of Africa a commonplace in political theory, that multinational states are the rule in the world and 'nation-states' are the exception.⁷ On the contrary, without exception Africanists have written as if Africa's 'multi-nation states' are anomalous and as if their striving to create 'supranational identities' must be subsumed under some do-nothing concept of 'nation-building', separate and wildly different from analogous processes in Canada, Belgium, or Russia.

So new was Mr. Sklar's awareness of the non-genericity of African problems that he could not in his paper cite any Africanist who had found parallels between Africa and Europe, even if it is early modern Europe, before 1984. He writes (1993: 85): "A few Africanists, among who[m] Thomas M. Callaghy (1984) is foremost, have perceived historical parallels between Africa today and the age of absolutism in early modern Europe." And, of course, he went on to recommend as a new insight what ought to have been the hallmark of good scholarship all along: that our theoretical inventory ought to

7 See Walker Connor (1973); Olufemi Táiwò (1991).

explain as much empirical phenomena as possible. If Africanists were to heed this advice even in this late day, perhaps African Studies might one day enrich global disciplinary discourses. But the fact that it took a leading Africanist until 1993 to discover that Africa is a part of common humanity and should be studied as such, is both an indictment of the constitutive theory and methodologies of this discipline, as well as a confirmation of our thesis that African Studies in the United States and Canada is *sui generis*.

It is this feature that sets African Studies apart from other area studies, which in other respects provide us with good analogies for our premise that African Studies as a North American product has been constituted for American and Canadian purposes. Consider the many centres for Russian, or Soviet and Slavic Studies, or the many institutions that used to be dedicated to Eastern European, or those concerned with Asian Studies—which were integral branches of American foreign policy during the Cold War. It would have been ludicrous for anyone to suggest that those centres and allied institutions were set up in order to satisfy the needs of Russians, Soviets, or anyone else on the other side of the Cold War in Eastern Europe or Asia. Nevertheless, the antagonistic problematic that actuated the products of those institutes has not stopped East Europeans or Asians ever since from helping themselves to the knowledge that has been accumulated, given altered circumstances in the present day. The analogy to African Studies rests upon the fact that although it has been constituted for North American purposes and remains an integral part of the North American MOKP, the knowledge thereby produced may yet be appropriated by Africans for their own use, or selectively incorporated into their respective modes of knowledge production. But such appropriations remain incidental from the point of view that spawned the initial motivation for the process that yielded these products. Thus, some new developments and shifts within the American mode of knowledge production—African Studies in particular—have occasioned new tensions and fresh controversies among the personnel of the American educational and research institutions that produce knowledge about Africa. These tensions and their implications for future social relations of knowledge production in African Studies will be identified and discussed throughout the rest of this chapter.

Intercontinental rifts

As I have argued, knowledge production in African Studies is dedicated to the needs of the American MOKP, as inscribed in the traditions of scholarship domiciled in the United States. As such, it is to be expected that the majority of Africanist practitioners will be Americans. In addition, as indicated above, Africanist themes and dominant methodologies are sometimes framed by the limited concerns of the United States even within African centres of research and learning. Because of America's wealth and its dominant role in world affairs, Africanists not only dominate African Studies in the United States, they wield a preponderant influence far beyond US borders in determining criteria for legitimacy, authority, and excellence in the study of Africa worldwide. This situation might pose problems for Africanists beyond US borders, but until about a decade and a

half ago, it did not present a warrant for contestation and controversy within the United States itself. Things have changed recently. In the present historical conjuncture some new elements have intruded that are beginning to disturb the placid waters of African Studies. It is the specificity of the present conjuncture that provokes special interest. We start by describing it.

The last two decades of the last century witnessed the decline, and in some cases the total collapse, of the university system and tertiary education in many African countries. As is well-known, this decline and collapse is a consequence of the politico-economic crises pervading the continent. One result of the severe decline and virtual collapse is the creation of a veritable incipient, but steadily growing, African contingent of a diasporic professoriat ensconced with differing degrees of permanence and security in North American educational institutions. The contingent has many segments. One segment is made up of African students who came to North America to study, originally intending to go back and build their academic and personal lives in their countries of origin. But because of the deteriorating conditions in those countries, few of the graduates were convinced that they could make an academic career in their native countries. Many of them have stayed put and secured academic positions in the United States and, increasingly, in Canada. We must locate in this category those graduates from other countries as well, for example, Canada and the United Kingdom, who come to the United States to pursue their scholarly careers and do not return to the lands of their emigration. Another segment comprises those scholars who studied in American or Canadian or other foreign institutions and initially did go back to their countries of origin on successful completion of their studies. Many such scholars have since been buying one-way tickets out of their homelands to immigrate to the United States, swelling the ranks of the diasporic professoriat. This segment is not limited to those who went to school outside their borders. There are some who took all of their education from institutions in African countries but have been recruited by American institutions to meet the exigencies of diversity.

Certainly, there were times in the past when African graduates immigrated to the United States. And students staying behind to pursue their careers after concluding their studies are not a new phenomenon. But it used to be the case that many of those who immigrated in the past either sought to mesh with their adopted country or, as was more likely, held out hopes of repatriating to Africa at a not too distant future date. What is new with the current contingent of the diasporic professoriat is that hopes of any repatriation in the near future are slim, maybe even forlorn. Because many of them are hired to teach African-related themes, and thereby are now contributors to the production of knowledge in African Studies, even when they refuse to identify themselves as such, we can begin to see how new dynamics might generate.

But why does the infusion of more Africans into the North American academy cause tensions in the African Studies community? First, many of the newly-arrived African scholars have very definite ideas of what the study of Africa should be, and of its appropriate aims and methodologies. These ideas often do not converge with those of African Studies in the American MOKP they have come to meet. These scholars, wherever

they went to school, have undergone training in the traditional disciplines; so they are wont to see themselves as political scientists, sociologists, historians, economists, and so on, and not as 'Africanists'. In the institutions that many of them momentarily returned to in various African countries, they had belonged to departments organised according to these traditional disciplines. Being restricted to 'African Studies' is something they have difficulty adjusting to. Indeed, they find the attempt to pin them with the 'Africanist' label too confining and, accordingly, they resist it. For what the label 'Africanist' does, in part, is to force them to think about problems which are not in fact specifically or generically African, in ways that are purported to be specifically or generically African.

Secondly, many of these academics are motivated by considerations that have more to do with the needs and exigencies of the MOKPs they acquired and left behind in Africa, and with the aims and objectives they defined for themselves within their former locales. That is, they come into African Studies in the United States with goals and objectives that were determined by the needs of different modes of knowledge production which therefore are likely to be at variance with American scholastic objectives today.

Thirdly, given their own understanding of African phenomena forged in the traditional academic disciplines, it is to be expected that these scholars would be put off by some of the arrogance of power manifested in the behaviour of some Africanists who mistakenly believe that they have Africa figured out! African scholars are aware of the complexity of their reality forged in lived experience, and of the seasoned effectiveness of their methodologies crafted in direct and sustained engagement with Africa as an object of study—methodologies which have proved successful within the larger testing ground of the scholarly disciplines more broadly and classically defined. But these are not the only causes of tension between Africanists and newly-arrived African scholars.

Before we explore these tensions further, one more preliminary clarification must be made. Although our focus is on the relations between African scholars and their Africanist counterparts in the present historical conjuncture in the United States' mode of knowledge production, it is not every aspect of these relations that we will discuss. For instance, the impact of African scholars who come to American institutions for short visits or to attend conferences does not fall within our purview. Visits to African countries by North American and European producers of knowledge in African Studies also fall outside our purview. Their visits are not often productive of the kind of tensions we are interested in. Nor shall we address the international traffic in the wholesale and retail lifting and looting of archival materials, documents, art objects, and other artefacts from various African sources, that is part of the global organisation of knowledge production. Finally, the creation of patron/client or principal/agent relations between American scholars and African counterparts will not be discussed.

The tensions generated by the more or less permanent relocation of African scholars from Africa and other places to the United States, and their implications for knowledge production in African Studies in North America, are what interest us. In shifting physically to relocate in spaces—for working and living—in the United States, these scholars manage in diverse ways to alter the spatial and intellectual components of the American

MOKP of which African Studies is an arm. In the present conjuncture, some of those who have always been objects of knowledge and investigation—at most just facilitators of the process of knowledge production—have shifted position and become themselves subjects and agents, clamouring for their places in the intellectual sun⁸ within the same spatial configurations (in the American university and allied institutions) as those who used to be subjects exclusively. Next, I present a model of what might have been the case in the past; then I juxtapose what seems to me increasingly to be the case and promises to be much more so in the future. I conclude by speculating on the future course of knowledge production in African Studies in the United States.

Formerly when African scholars working on African themes followed the pattern of repatriation after studying in the USA or Europe, African studies were framed by the concerns defined by knowledge production in the United States. Simultaneously, Africans had intermittent contacts with people and events in the United States and Canada, and could afford to take a benign view of whatever they found disagreeable in African Studies in those distant countries. In the 1970s there were many centres of knowledge production concerning African phenomena in various African countries. To the extent that such material and intellectual spaces were available, African scholars could choose to combat erroneous formulations and prejudices at the American end by offering their own perspectives on the relevant topics. That may no longer be the case.

The decline and collapse of educational systems in Africa alluded to earlier has led to the emigration of numerous African scholars from Africa and other locations. As a consequence, African scholars are no longer physically removed from whatever they may find disagreeable in African Studies. Even if they want to distance themselves mentally from such matters, their physical presence in material spaces within which knowledge production in African Studies takes place makes this divorce impracticable. They can no longer afford to ignore error. They do so only at the risk of appearing to sanction it. Thanks to spatial contiguity, they are called upon more often to rejoin arguments that the spatial separation of the past used to allow them to by-pass, ignore or remain oblivious of. This is an inescapable source of tension and it is a consequence of the new factors introduced by the present conjuncture.

In the past, it would have been easy for the relations between Africanist knowledge producers in African Studies and their African counterparts to remain friendly, cordial, generous, and magnanimous. This is easily explained. The relationship was based largely on a host-guest and guest-host pattern with all that such collaborations entail in terms of reciprocity. Whenever African scholars came calling, whatever their hosts did not like either about their behaviour or what might have discomfited them in what their guests had

8 A word of caution here. Ibrahim Abdullah has pointed out to me the careerist implications of this way of framing the issue. That is, some may interpret my suggestion in terms of African scholars wishing to rise up the academic ladder. While that will be a legitimate interpretation, it is not how I wish to be understood. The issue is whether or not African scholars can get to be recognised authorities with the legitimacy to decide the criteria of excellence, relevance, and adequacy, the framers of vocabulary and voices of expertise, in the study of Africa. This is what I mean by clamouring for places in the intellectual sun.

to say, the Africanist hosts could suffer them momentarily, and vice versa. In competition for grants and publication opportunities, African scholars had no opportunity to complain about losing out; because they were not located in the United States MOKP or within the boundaries of the country, they could not seek the protection it offered for fair treatment and equitable consideration. In short, they were happy to produce knowledge within their indigenous MOKPs. Here is another area where qualitative changes in the international dimensions are generating new tensions.

In the indigenous MOKPs based within Africa, the production of Africanist knowledge did not frame their efforts. In fact, 'African Studies' mostly designated specialised, multi-, cross-, and inter-disciplinary research and teaching. For the rest, knowledge production unfolded within the traditional disciplines. Although many in Africa sought to provide one or another specifically African perspective for the problems they studied, they did not consider those *problems* as 'specifically or generically African'. Quite the contrary. When they advanced African views identified as such, it was largely to inform the scholarly community of specific African attempts at solving what are essentially universal human problems. African scholars would routinely invite their fellow searchers worldwide to learn from the African experience. In other words, what Sklar hopes will form the future framework of African Studies has always been the frame of reference for the study of Africa by African scholars.

With more and more African scholars accepting positions in American academies, the gloves have come off. A good example was the controversy inaugurated by Philip Curtin when he published his "Ghettoizing African History."⁹ Among other things, Curtin alleged that African historians are taking jobs away from American native (especially white) producers of knowledge in African Studies. That charge was bad enough especially given that he provided only anecdotal support for his allegation. Much worse was his charge that because native producers are being alienated from African Studies, the quality of the product is in decline. Many were startled by Curtin's charges. Others were scandalised. Many African scholars and several Africanists expressed outrage. But if we accept our assumption that African Studies is not for Africans, by Africans, or near Africans, it is less puzzling to find that one of the founding fathers of American African Studies felt compelled to sound an alarm about the changes that are bound to occur in the complexion of the discipline as a consequence of the entry of many Africans into it. The fears voiced by Curtin are well-founded.

Knowledge is power; so goes the adage. To the extent that African scholars credibly challenge and occasionally upset established wisdom in African Studies, they can—and, on occasion, they will—undermine the claims of Africanists to scholarly authority in the production of knowledge about Africa. Given the divergent aims of African scholars and their Africanist counterparts, such disputes are bound to go to the heart of the Africanist enterprise. Additionally, African scholars are wont to challenge what they see

⁹ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 1995. This essay and the responses to it have now been reprinted in "The Ghettoization Debate: Africa, Africans and African Studies," *Bulletin of Association of Concerned Africa Scholars* 46 Winter (1996).

as unacceptable, and sometimes as un-illuminating, appropriations of their reality by their Africanist opposites. Such challenges cannot but threaten those whose suffocating control over knowledge of Africa in North America has been firmly ensconced for so long. We should expect more controversies in the future. For there should be no doubt that there are fundamental divergences between the goals that African Studies serves when motivated by the needs of the American MOKP, and those goals that African scholars who immigrate to the United States wish to pursue in their knowledge production activities. These are not turf battles. They are struggles over who should define the metric for measuring quality, who should determine the appropriateness of research themes, moderate success in the area of production of knowledge about Africa. Whose authority shall prevail in the production of knowledge in African Studies in the United States?

In relocating to the United States, African scholars are no longer guests whose occasional presence can be tolerated. They are now competing with their erstwhile hosts—sponsors, referees, supervisors, and other colleagues—for grants, publication opportunities, and the respect of their peers within the academic community. Professionally, they are less likely to be as benign as they used to be in their attitudes towards what may strike them as errors, misrepresentations, or distortions, by their Africanist counterparts. Indeed the criteria of what counts as expertise in African Studies, about which Curtin made a lot of fuss in his outburst, are apt to become bones of contention more so now than at any other time. These contestations may bewilder many who proceed from the mistaken assumption that all who work within African Studies share the same dominant principles that inform knowledge production more generally in the United States of America. To appreciate the nature of the conflict, it is best to acknowledge that (unlike their Africanist counterparts) African scholars resident in the United States who are obliged to work in African Studies are actually motivated by DuBoisian principles—whereby African Studies should be about, by, for, and near Africans. This recognition provides a plausible explanation for the tensions described so far.

Meanwhile, Africanist scholars who themselves might have ignored rejoinders of African scholars in the past, or in comparably dismissive though benign ways paid scant attention to them, can no longer afford to do so. Even if Africanists wished to ignore African authorities, the changed circumstances would not let them. Rejoinders are more difficult to ignore where the mores of dialogic encounters involve living, breathing, immediately present interlocutors. For the contention of a critic in the same seminar room demands recognition and response. For similar reasons, antipathies are more difficult to hide when one keeps running into the object of one's animus in the hallways, at seminars, conferences, and colloquia. Nor should it be forgotten that the ultimate consumers of the knowledge produced will not let the producers get away from addressing rejoinders they would rather avoid or ignore. Nowadays students have easier global access to materials, especially those of African scholars, that never used to be readily available; and nowadays they often insist that their teachers show why material has been neglected that challenges the positions canvassed as definitive. In these new circumstances, tensions are inevitable.

Given what has been said so far, it is not surprising that doublespeak, a veritable feature of past relationships between Africanist knowledge producers and their African counterparts, is a lot more difficult to pull off now than it used to be. There have been times when native American scholars have praised some of their African counterparts in public—only to savage them in private, in the comfort and company of their fellow native academics. And there is probably a surfeit of after-dinner anecdotes, told by respected and respectable Africanists, of their peregrinations and misadventures in Africa in quest of knowledge. Many of these same producers are prim and proper in public, going on interminably about what a good time they had in Africa, what generous hosts their African counterparts were—variations on the theme of “Africans are among my best friends.”¹⁰ With the growing presence of resident African scholars in the American academy, doublespeak has become much more difficult to hide.

The difficulty cannot be explained solely by the physical presence of African scholars; there are other ramifications. Thanks to easier access to the material instruments of knowledge production on the African side of the Atlantic, African scholars can now take part in, and occasionally eavesdrop on, conversations to which they were never privy in the past. I give one example because it typifies the general theme of this section. Reading postings on the internet can be quite instructive with respect to the doublespeak of some of Africa's friends-in-public qua denigrators-in-private. About thirteen years ago, I was horrified to read the following posting on the Nuafrica network on the internet:

synonym: Uganda = Magendo

The author of this posting is one of the leading lights of African Studies in the United States and his name is invoked regularly as one of the experts on Africa. He himself is not beyond gloating about his ties with Africa and Africans: he served as an election monitor in Guinea in 1995. If anyone had associated any identifiable group in the United States with the kind of criminal activity that 'Magendo' is in Uganda, and had regarded the group as synonymous with the activity, there would have been deafening calls for the person's ouster. But not so for Africa and the antics of Africa's friends in the American academy. I never heard any native American scholar of African Studies excoriate Ralph Austen for his libel against Ugandans!

I have suggested that a helpful way of understanding some of the controversies and conundrums that occur in African Studies is to recognise the divergence in the founding and defining principles of the discipline between Africanists and African scholars. This, as I have also pointed out, is not peculiar to Africa as a regional focus of scholarship and research. The same thing can be said of Asian Studies or Russian Studies or Middle East Studies in the United States. In addition to the preceding analysis, what this model does is to illuminate our understanding of why there is so much variance between what African scholars insist are matters of urgency and what Africanist scholars are interested

¹⁰ I am sure that African scholars, too, perform their own variations on this theme after visits to the United States.

in investigating. There are often divergences on what to study, when and how to study it. Again, this is not limited to African Studies. Similar conflicts prevail in Women's Studies, Development Studies, Environmental Studies, and so on.

Finally, one must remark upon the many absences in African Studies. Few will deny that political science is an eminent component of African Studies, judged by its long involvement with Africa, the distinguished careers of its Africanist practitioners, and the quality and quantity of its output. Despite this, political science has remained mired in the standard (some might say hackneyed) themes that dominate knowledge production about Africa—'tribalism', 'ethnicity', 'nation-building', and from the 1990s to now, 'patrimonialism' and 'failed states'. One would have thought that if these themes have been canvassed and explored for so long and still there is very little illumination about Africa emanating from them, their sponsors would back off and veer in new directions on that very count. This has not happened. The unilluminating consequences of these conceptual and thematic choices might help explain the lack of respect that Sklar complained about. If you were a political theorist looking for articulations of federalism in a multinational setting, it is unlikely that you would look to Africa for theoretical elaborations on the theme. For, after all, isn't Africa full of tribes and their murderous chieftains and warlords? And you first have to fashion national or state units out of these tribes before you can insert them in the theoretical discourse of nationalism, federalism, and so on. So you are likely to take a pass on Africa. To that extent, in misconstruing or misrepresenting the subject-matter—for whatever reasons such misrepresentations persist—the Africanist political scientist has rendered his or her work uninteresting and irrelevant to the larger disciplinary community. Consider the obverse: if you are looking for the quaint, the odd, the unusual, the unique, the natural, to insert in your reference list—I see such requests every so often on the internet—chances are you will expect your request to be granted by some Africanist or equivalent. The consequence is that the scholarly community is ill-served by exactly those whom they understandably look up to in order to provide guidance and direction.

In addition, there is very little if any respect for, and on occasion an outright failure to recognise, the capacity of African thinkers for relevant, sophisticated theorising that holds promise for solving problems which occur in other parts of the world. When Africanists are confronted about these omissions in the United States and Canada, a standard response is the slander "Africans are not ready for theory,"¹¹ or another variant: the dismissal of African thinkers as "simplistic and tendentious."¹² The following names surely do not enjoy any currency among Africanists: Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abd el Nasser, Mohammed Ben Barka, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sekou Toure, Leopold Senghor (except as a poet), Albert Luthuli, Mbonu Ojike, J. E. Casely-Hayford, T. A. Wallace-Johnson,

11 This was the response of a prominent Canadian Africanist when queried by an African graduate student who was curious to know why African theorists were not on the reading list for the graduate seminar he was taking from the Africanist.

12 A direct quote from another eminent Canadian Africanist. Incidentally, two of the writers so dismissed are Frantz Fanon and Julius Nyerere!

William Essuman Gwira, George Padmore, Cheikh Anta Diop, Julius Nyerere, Kofi Busia; the list continues. Anyone who cares to familiarise herself with the works of any of the individuals just listed is unlikely to need any introduction by me.¹³ A lot of mis-education results from these absences. For example, because Africanists are hung up on issues of tribalism and the nation-building problematic, not a single one of them has bothered to study the contributions of an Awolowo to an understanding of the theoretical problems of federalism and of creating a supra-national identity from a congeries of nations occurrent within a common geopolitical boundary. For many of them, one would think that the best word in Nigerian politics has been written by James Coleman, Richard Sklar, and their younger successors like Larry Diamond! My point is not to stop people from quoting the latter, but to insist that scholars take seriously the theoretical understanding of their situation offered by African intellectuals themselves. In scholarship motivated by the need to expand the frontiers of knowledge, the importance of my suggestion is obvious.

To take another example, while many Africanists pretend to be authorities on the nonviability of the small states that proliferate in Africa, Nkrumah had written, back in the 1960s, that there was no hope for the continent as long as it remained divided into mini-states waiting on Paris, London, or Washington DC, for their national budgets, with their leaders becoming marionettes in the hands of the Powers. One ordinarily would have thought that a genuine interest in what Africa can teach America about the issues of pluralism, rights, consensual democracy, community, freedom, and so on, would have engendered a more serious engagement with African contributions to knowledge rather than a preoccupation with issues that titillate more than they illuminate. Here then is the source of future contestations in the American academy in the sphere of knowledge production in African Studies.

We should expect African scholars resident in the United States and Canada to raise discomfiting questions about the legitimacy of certain themes, to controvert the integrity of certain methodologies, to reconfigure the criteria of expertise in this area and, above all, to demand a little more respect for the complexity of life and thought in Africa. Whether these demands can be met within the extant framework of African Studies is an issue that I prefer to leave open for now. What is beyond dispute is that given what has been discussed in this essay, the road ahead promises to be rough and treacherous.

¹³ For those who do, please see Táiwò (2004a); (2004b).