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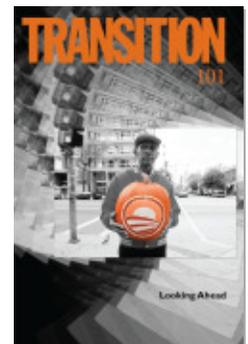
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African Studies and Universities since Independence:  
*the challenges of epistemic and institutional decolonization*

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# African Studies and Universities since Independence

*the challenges of epistemic and institutional decolonization*

## Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

IN MARCH 1957, two important events took place in the political and intellectual histories of Africa. One happened on the continent itself: the declaration of independence of Ghana; the other, in the United States: the formation of the African Studies Association (ASA). Both were products of the momentous struggles for decolonization and symbolic of Africa's changing presence in the worlds of international affairs and knowledge production. The decolonization of Ghana opened the floodgates of African independence; the formation of the ASA fortified Africanist scholarship in the world's most powerful nation.

Despite their obvious connections, the two events represented divergent historical trajectories culminating in the consecration of *black* political autonomy and *white* intellectual authority. Ghana was not the first African country to gain independence from colonial rule in the twentieth century—that honor belongs to Libya, which achieved independence in December 1951, or perhaps Egypt, which became self-governing in 1922. Similarly, the thirty-six (predominantly white) Africanists who founded the ASA in New York were not the first scholars to study Africa seriously; African American scholar-activists hold that distinction. The preeminence given to Ghana in the pantheon of African independence and the ASA in the annals of African studies betrays the braided racialized histories of African independence and African studies: the construction of Africa as *black*, a truncation of the continent to its sub-Saharan components, a paradigm that is sanctified in Eurocentric historiography and faithfully reproduced in Africanist scholarship.

Ghana's achievement of independence and the formation of the ASA marked a critical moment—still very far from completion—in Africa's age-old drive to decolonize its political and knowledge economies. In both cases, the fifty-odd years since have witnessed remarkable developments marked by impressive successes and ignoble failures. This has been the story of African universities on the continent and African studies around the world. Insofar as the bulk of African universities were established and African studies spread to most parts of the world following independence,

the fates of universities within and African studies outside the continent continue to be interlocked, as they were in 1957.

This is, of course, not to claim that little has changed. Over the last fifty years, African studies and African universities have undergone many twists and turns as both have expanded from their rather modest beginnings. Today, both are vast enterprises encompassing thousands of colleges and supporting institutions—from publishers to conferences to consultancies—that cater to millions of students, faculty, and staff in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Predictably, the institutional, intellectual, and ideological dynamics and tendencies of African studies and African universities are exceedingly difficult to analyze, in part because of the very complexity of their interconnections, reinforced by the globalization of higher education.

Even a cursory glance reveals that the landscape of African higher education is more variegated than ever before. It consists of institutions that are public and private; secular and religious; comprehensive and specialized; large and small; transnational and parochial; research intensive and vocational; and whose composition of faculty, students, and staff varies in terms of gender, class, and other defining social markers, as do their relations with the state, economy, and society. Similarly, the global African studies field has grown and been transformed as its social composition—the racial, gender, generational, and national identities of its members—has changed. Scholarly agendas have expanded and become more complex, with shifting disciplinary and interdisciplinary configurations and the periodic emergence of new theoretical, thematic, and topical interests. The processes and structures of knowledge production have responded to the massive reorganization of universities, the publishing industry, and the technologies of information dissemination and consumption. The public and political charges and constituencies of academic communities have adjusted to complicated and contradictory transformations in African and global political economies and ideologies.

Developments within and outside Africa—in African universities and African studies programs overseas—influence each other in obvious and sometimes oblique ways. The flows of influence are multiple in their directions and levels. The institutionalization of African studies around the world in the 1950s and 1960s cannot be divorced from the processes of African nationalism and decolonization, which raised the political and paradigmatic profile of the new independent states for foreign policy makers and higher education institutions.

Several decades later, the crisis of African universities in the 1980s and 1990s led to the migration of thousands of African academics to universities in the global North, which changed the social composition and intellectual terrain of the field. Along the way, Africanists in the Anglophone world exported and imported theoretical and methodological frameworks from other parts of the world. Africanists were inspired by the works of Latin American

dependency theorists, French postmodernist thinkers, Indian subaltern historians, and African feminists, to mention only a few examples. The processes of contemporary globalization—intensified flows of capital, commodities, and cultures across communities, countries, and continents—have reinforced the universalizing ambitions and propensities of universities. Globalization is simultaneously producing new contexts and imperatives for intellectual communities, thus increasing transnational intellectual flows and engagements.

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ONE CAN EXAMINE the developments of African studies and African universities since independence in terms of both *moments* and *models*. Defining *moments* entails identifying dominant tendencies. Periodization is fundamental to the craft of historians, essential to historical explanation and coherence; it contextualizes events and processes, giving them meaning and importance, and conditions our images of the past; it generates many of the theories and abstractions that sustain historical discourse, thus defining the protocols of scholarly production and turf among historians. Periodization is the essence of historicity, albeit always difficult to construct, because of the complex interplay of intellectual, institutional, and ideological dynamics. Three broad periods can be discerned in the development of African universities: the *golden era*, the *crisis era*, and the *recovery era*.

The golden era, which lasted from the 1950s to the late 1970s, was characterized by the excitement of building new universities and expanding old ones, all underpinned by the triumph of African nationalism and the euphoria of independence. During this era, vigorous efforts were made to decolonize the disciplines, to strip them of their Eurocentric cognitive and civilizational conceits. But no sooner had African universities consolidated themselves than their institutional and intellectual standing began to erode as a result of pecuniary and political crises brought about by the rising tide of austerity—or neo-liberal economic restructuring—and authoritarianism, especially pronounced from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. Since then, recovery has begun in some countries, as the recessions of development and democracy have been halted and are even being reversed with renewed economic growth and political liberalization. The era of recovery is still in its early phases, for African universities continue to face severe challenges.

Identifying scholarly tendencies for African studies is equally challenging. Institutionally, African studies has been included within existing disciplines or else seen as an independent discipline or “interdiscipline” in the humanities and social sciences, manifested in various organizational forms: departments, centers, institutes, or programs. Ideologically, it has exhibited imperial, solidarity-promoting, and liberatory tendencies. Intellectually, African studies has been dominated by culturalist, developmentalist,



**Kwaku,**  
***Assimilation***  
***in Transition.***  
 2008. Mixed  
 media, 57 x  
 74 inches

deconstructionist, and globalist imperatives. Needless to say, these moments and trends manifest themselves quite differently in different countries and world regions, as the political economies of knowledge production are often highly spatialized. Knowledge systems and paradigms are mediated and mapped by the unyielding demands of historical geography. For this reason, the three moments identified for African universities cannot be expected to be replicated in other world regions. Yet there have been broad global trends. A global framework is useful not only because we live in an increasingly globalized world, but also because it enables us to transcend the myopic tendency to envelop developing and developed countries—in Africa and the rest of the world—in mystificatory exceptionalisms.

In many parts of the world, including Europe and the Americas, the mid-1970s marked the end of the long postwar boom, which was followed by the neoliberal era of slow growth, and the dismantling of the welfare state in the global North and the developmentalist state in the global South. The consequences for social sectors such as higher education were predictably severe: cutbacks in fiscal support for public education led to the expansion of private universities and the privatization of public universities. Since the 1980s, there has been a widespread perception that public universities as institutions, and academia as a profession, are facing unprecedented crises brought about by globalization. Rapid technological, economic, political, and sociocultural transformations emanating from both the wider world and academia itself are eroding the old systems, structures, and stabilities

of higher education. Powerful internal and external forces—as much pedagogical and paradigmatic as they are pecuniary, political, and demographic—are reconfiguring all aspects of university life constituted around the triple mission of teaching, research, and service. Battles of various kinds and intensities are being waged within and outside university systems over missions and mandates, legitimacy and status as producers, disseminators, and consumers of scientific and scholarly knowledge.

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THE POSTCOLONIAL UNIVERSITY was founded to promote the dreams of African nationalism: decolonization and development. Both the political class and the intelligentsia saw these as essential for achieving and sustaining African self-determination. Thus, in the heady years immediately following independence, academics were as intoxicated as the politicians by the tantalizing and totalizing dreams of building their new nations, of refashioning their place in a world that had long exploited and oppressed them. New universities were founded; old regional universities were dismantled and reconstituted as national universities; and growing numbers of academics—many of them returning from overseas with hard-earned degrees, eager to reshape their societies—happily joined the ranks of the expanding middle classes. This was the golden era, before relations between the new rulers and restive intellectuals turned sour, and African universities fell on hard times.

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During the colonial period, the imperial tendency had predominated in both Africa and the few overseas institutions that deemed it even worthwhile to teach about Africa. Whatever its other objectives, colonialism was not an educational enterprise, as evidenced by the fact that it left behind very few universities in Africa—indeed, the majority of countries did not have even a single university at independence. The few colonial universities were established rather belatedly, during the twilight years of empire, as a means of producing skilled professionals to serve a maturing colonial capitalism and save it from the dangerous agitation of the nationalist masses. Small and elitist, colonial universities were unapologetically Eurocentric, patterned on the metropolitan universities from which they drew much of their faculty and curricula. African history was not even taught, for African societies were supposed to have had no history before the “civilizing mission” of the European conquest. At best, Africa was the subject of anthropological folklore.

South Africa was one of the few countries with a sizeable university system, although higher education was racially segregated almost from the



**Kwaku, *Stand On Your Own*.**  
2006. Mixed media, 38 x 38 inches

beginning. The introduction of apartheid in 1948 reinforced the iron grid of racial inequality in education, as blacks were no longer allowed to attend the “white” universities without special government approval, and separate universities were created for Africans in the so-called self-governing homelands and for “Coloreds” and Indians in the major cities. If the white universities were unapologetically Eurocentric, the black universities were irredeemably condemned to the mediocrity of Bantu education. And when African studies was introduced in the white universities—as Mahmood Mamdani observed in his trenchant critique of African studies at University of Cape Town in 1998—it was really *Bantu* studies, focusing on Bantu administration, customary law, Bantu languages and anthropology. The “Africa” of Bantu studies, like that of Euroamerican African studies, was confined to the Hegelian construct of tropical, equatorial, black, sub-Saharan Africa.

Only in independent Africa did the liberatory thrust of African studies—first developed in the diaspora—find an auspicious home, as the newly independent states sought to undo a century of colonial educational neglect and to decolonize African studies. The expansion of higher education after independence was phenomenal: hundreds of universities were established, and

the number of university students skyrocketed from 120,000 in 1960 to 3.5 million by 1995. The postcolonial universities were much larger in size than their colonial predecessors, broader in their missions, and they expanded their disciplinary and curricula offerings. The new universities were designed as engines of socioeconomic transformation and centers of epistemic emancipation, as the African intelligentsia readily rediscovered and rewrote their peoples' histories and humanity so cruelly seized and denied by Europe.

The emancipatory mission of African studies was unambiguously articulated by Ghana's first President, Kwame Nkrumah, when he opened the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in 1961, and when he addressed the first Congress of Africanists in Accra in 1962. Nkrumah, a Pan-Africanist, urged his academic audience to produce genuine knowledge about Africa through scientific and academic rigor—knowledge that would promote Africa's development and transformation—and to share their discoveries with the rest of the world. Nkrumah was schooled in the civil rights struggles of the segregated diaspora and the nationalist struggles of colonial Africa, and he was passionately committed to Africa's regeneration in all spheres.

Over the next four decades, the struggles for intellectual decolonization scored uneven victories across Africa. The multiple developmental crises engendered by structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s also affected higher education, gravely undermining the liberatory capacities and commitments of African universities and intellectuals. The divorce between academia and the state commenced when the technocratic agenda assigned to the universities—to produce skilled professionals and workers

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for the indigenization of the state bureaucracy and the “formal” economy—was increasingly achieved, a success due in part to the small size of most African countries and economies and the deceleration of economic growth from the mid-1970s on. To the overseers of the state, whose incapacity to deliver the fruits of *uhuru* [independence] became increasingly evident, the university had not only lost its mission, but was becoming a potentially dangerous site populated by volatile educated youths and devious academics who reveled in purveying “foreign ideology” and “irrelevant” theoretical research. During the lost decade of the 1980s, state-sanctioned anti-intellectualism found succor in the strange gospel from the World Bank, that Africa needed primary schools rather than universities. Meanwhile, the influx of expatriates lowered the short-term costs of neglecting African universities and the concomitant emigration of skilled labor, including academics. By the late 1990s, there were an estimated 100,000 expatriates working in Africa—at a cost of \$4 billion—almost equal to the number of skilled Africans who had left.

In this context, the liberatory mission of the postcolonial university gave way to the imperatives of survival, as middle-class comforts slipped from the lives of academics in many countries. Diminishing resources, combined with mounting state tyranny, led to the deterioration of research, teaching, and physical infrastructures; the demoralization of faculty and students; and a social devaluation of the status of academics and the scholarly enterprise. The “brain drain”—or “brain hemorrhage”—from the universities to other sectors at home, or to universities abroad, intensified. Many academics became consultancy hustlers and informal sector hawkers and hacks. But another, more productive response to the crisis was the establishment by prematurely retired or part-time university academics of an intellectually vibrant and autonomous academic NGO sector comprising continental, subregional, and national research networks and organizations.



THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY crisis shifted the primacy of knowledge production in African studies—which had belonged to African institutions for a brief, exciting period during the golden era—to universities in the global North, especially the United States, where by the 1970s the field was firmly anchored in area studies. Before the development of the area studies model in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African studies was largely confined to the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and dominated by African American scholar-activists. The post-World War II, Cold War era marked the second phase in the development of the field, when the gravity of African studies shifted toward European American scholars and historically white universities bankrolled by foundations and the federal government’s Title VI programs. The end of the Cold War ushered in the third phase, when a vigorous assault was launched against area studies, including African studies, and their viability on U.S. campuses appeared threatened.

Four major critiques were advanced against area studies, each of which was vigorously and sometimes effectively rebutted by area studies practitioners. First, it was argued that the idea of area studies was a Cold War political project that had now outlived its usefulness. Second, area studies were said by scholars such as David Szanton (in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* [2004]) to be “merely ‘ideographic,’ primarily concerned with description, as opposed to the ‘nomothetic’ or theory building and generalizing character of the core social science disciplines.”

Others maintained that area studies scholars uncritically propagated the universalizing or localizing categories, perspectives, commitments, and theories of their imperialist interlocutors in the metropolises and their nativist informants in the postcolonies. Champions of globalization contended that

the “new world order” of enhanced transnational economic, cultural, information, and demographic flows rendered the old structures for organizing and producing knowledge in bounded regions increasingly obsolete. What was now required, in the place of old-fashioned area studies, it was argued, were international or global studies or, at the very least, comparative regional studies.

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) abolished its area studies committees in 1996 and foundations duly withdrew their funding support for area studies and launched new initiatives on cross-regional and globalization issues. But the American triumphalism of the 1990s was brought to a sudden halt by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which made it clear that history was not over after all, and foreign cultures still existed that demanded understanding—translation—on their own terms. Thus began the fourth phase, marked by renewed expansion of area studies programs, as universities embraced the national security imperative of the state and rediscovered the importance of educational internationalization. Universities that had never hired Africanists before suddenly began to do so. Ironically, some of the larger and older African studies centers—such as those at Columbia, UCLA, Boston University, and Northwestern—began to face challenges of leadership and direction and saw their programs shrink.

Historically, in the United States, both imperial and liberatory tendencies have coexisted and competed most fiercely. The presence of a large African diaspora is the primary reason for this. The United States is currently home to nearly 40 million people of African descent, who, if they

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were a country, would be Africa’s sixth most populous (after South Africa). On the one hand, knowledges of Africa are a part of the arsenal of imperial hegemony for the world’s lone—and until recently rather lonely—superpower. Indeed, conventional histories of African studies, such as the one commissioned by the ASA and produced by Jane Guyer in 1996, attribute the development of African studies to the historically white universities, where it is said the field emerged after World War II to serve the national security agenda of the United States, then embroiled in superpower rivalry with the Soviet Union to win hearts and minds in the Third World.

While this narrative is correct as far as the historically white universities that currently dominate African studies are concerned, it ignores the origins of the field in the HBCUs before the white universities discovered African studies in the context of the Cold War. African studies as an academic field was pioneered by Howard, not Northwestern, and by W. E. B. Du Bois, rather than Melville Herskovits. The Africa of African American activist-scholars focused on Africa’s global civilizational status, the



**Kwaku,  
Akoma Asem  
*I (A Heart's  
Matter)*. 2008.  
Mixed media,  
23 x 25 inches**

Continent as a whole, and its diasporic connections. In contrast, the Africa of professional Africanists became increasingly prescriptive, focusing on Africa's deficiencies and that strange contraption called "sub-Saharan Africa."

Ironically, the civil rights movement, which brought more African studies and African American studies programs to U.S. campuses, led to an institutional and racial split in African studies, as African American scholars gravitated and were pushed to African American studies, and African studies came to be dominated by European American scholars. More recently, yet another Africa has emerged in the American academy, that of continental African scholars who relocated in growing numbers, from the 1980s on, as African universities faced the crisis of structural maladjustment, thanks to the misdirected policies of the international financial institutions unwisely followed by African leaders. These scholars brought with them the preoccupations and anxieties of postcolonial Africa.

Thus, there are now at least three "Africas" in the American academy, each with its own history, and this has made contestations within African studies complex and fierce. The imperial and liberatory tendencies have jostled for supremacy for the last half century. In the twenty-first century, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, we are back to the security

imperative that guided area studies at the height of the Cold War, and the imperial tendency frames funding formulas of area studies, including African studies, by state agencies and private foundations. At the same time, however, the Africana studies movement and the diaspora studies movement are reconfiguring the study of Africa, forcing new realignments within the American academy among Africanists and Africans, including engagements between them and the institutions and intellectual communities based on the continent.

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AMONG THE COLONIAL powers of Western Europe, the imperial tendency has predominated with little domestic contestation. Knowledge of Africa, however distorted or self-serving, was of course an essential part of the colonial project, although courses in African studies were systematically introduced into British, French, Belgium, and Portuguese universities after World War II. In fact, the first lectureship in Africa history was set up at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (a name it adopted in 1938 after having been called the "School of Oriental Studies"

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from its formation in 1916). Empire and its aftermath continue to structure African studies in these countries, notwithstanding the differences of national intellectual traditions. African studies developed and became a *bona fide* discipline within the former colonial powers because of the existence of the Africa of colonial memory. Such countries have found it particularly difficult to incorporate the other Africas within and the African diasporas—largely created out of empire—ensconced within the former colonial powers' borders. African studies remains there, by and large, the study of the colonial and postcolonial "other."

Not surprisingly, African intellectual voices—whether those of the historic diasporas or the recent immigrants of structural adjustment—remain muted in much of the West European academy. Francophone scholars have been trekking to the Anglophone world, especially the United States, rather than France, because of restrictive French immigration policies and institutional racism. The relocated Francophone scholars are forced to produce works in English, which are not readily translated in France. (For example, V. Y. Mudimbe's canonical text, *The Invention of Africa*, published in 1988, has yet to be translated into French.) Yet, Anglophone scholars happily imbibe, and enjoy becoming intoxicated with, translated French high theory. Intellectual inhospitality is, of course, not a failing peculiar to Gallic conceit. Good old Britain faces similar challenges of



**Kwaku, Akoma Asem 2.** 2008. Mixed media, 23 x 24 inches

how to develop more equitable and productive relations between not only white and black British Africanists but also the African academics who have migrated to Britain since the 1990s. Scholars of African descent often complain bitterly of their professional and textual exclusion from the African studies canon.

Germany offers a peculiar case, as a colonial power that lost its African empire after World War I. In Germany, African studies has exhibited a complex amalgam of imperial and solidarity tendencies, especially if we consider the two Germanys of the post-World War II era. Scholarship in West Germany continued the long colonial tradition of studying African languages and cultural areas, themes that echoed more general scholarly preoccupations with German migrations and cultural formation. In East

Germany, in contrast, Africanist scholarship expressed Marxist solidarities with Africa's oppressed classes and nations.

If the operations, legacies, and imperatives of imperialism structured African studies in Britain and France, and more ambivalently in Germany, the impulses of solidarity have been most evident in Sweden and Russia, as well as in parts of Asia. Swedish interest in Africa and African studies was motivated by the needs of small-power global diplomacy, specifically, political solidarity with the liberation movements in southern Africa and

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economic support for development cooperation, which was spawned by the ideological correspondence between the Swedish social welfare state project and the developmentalist state projects in the new African states. In the Soviet Union, African studies flourished, predicated on support for African anticolonial struggles and postindependence development and social transformation, and driven by the shifting preoccupations of Soviet Marxism and the nation's superpower status. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the solidarity imperative in African studies in Russia has waned, even if—or perhaps because—the field has become freer from ideological controls.

As for Asia, the solidarity imperative prevails in African studies in India and China. The development of African studies in India from the mid-1950s on owes much to the internationalist vision of India's leaders, especially Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, both of whom were Africanists in their own right. India's independence leaders believed fervently in Afro-Asian liberation and resurgence, and stressed the need for a clear and critical understanding of the world, hence the imperative to develop a cadre of academic specialists on various world regions. The establishment of African studies in China from the late 1950s on resulted from expanding ties between Africa and China in the aftermath of African decolonization and the Chinese revolution, and shared visions against European imperialism and for rapid development. As in India, there was strong ideological and fiscal support from the state for African studies programs. In China, African studies grew from a politically oriented to an academically oriented interdisciplinary and gradually expanded the range of its thematic and topical focus and disciplinary coverage.

In none of these countries did African studies develop out of liberatory impulses, that is, in order to produce Africanist knowledge for the empowerment and emancipation of marginalized and racialized national citizens, an impulse most pronounced in the Americas, among African diasporas, and within Africa itself. Race and racial hierarchies have been foundational for the settler societies of the Americas. They frame the political and cultural economies of social life and public and scholarly discourses. The role



**Kwaku, *Stand Together*.**  
2006. Mixed media, 34 x 34 inches

of *domestic* liberation politics in the development of African studies is readily apparent in Brazil and the Caribbean, as well.

Brazil has the largest African diaspora population in the world—an estimated 85 million. As President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva likes to say when meeting with African leaders, Brazil is the second most populous African country, after Nigeria! From the 1930s on, Brazil developed the myth of “racial democracy” following the failures of the “whitening” project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Afro-Brazilian activists and scholars began to mobilize the population to fight for a new dispensation that would promote racial equality. Specifically, demands were made for the teaching of African history and the history of Africans long ignored in Brazilian historiography, which disregarded the enormous contributions of Africans in the formation of the country. In 2003, a law was passed making compulsory the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture. This was a struggle to produce and disseminate complex, critical, and empowering histories of Africa and Brazil, recognizing the historicity and humanity of Africans and Afro-Brazilians, and incorporating Afro-Brazilian connections to both Africa and the other Afro-American diasporas.

Many of the Caribbean islands have African diaspora majorities, but from slavery and colonialism they developed insidious ideologies of racial disparagement against Africa and Africanness or blackness. Consequently, African

studies formally developed as a part of the wave of the black power movement and collective self-refashioning that followed independence, in the 1960s. The introduction of African studies in schools and institutions of higher learning emerged alongside an age-old popular, organic African presence and intellectual tradition embodied in the work of Caribbean intellectuals on African societies, cultures, and history. Most of these intellectuals were activists as well, ranging from Marcus Garvey and George Padmore to C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, and Arthur Lewis, who made significant contributions to Pan-Africanism and global intellectual movements.

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WHAT ARE THE intellectual tendencies exhibited in African studies and African universities, the dominant paradigms through which African phenomena and processes have been filtered and analyzed? Again, at the risk of oversimplification, I have identified four typologies: the *culturalist*, *developmentalist*, *deconstructionist*, and *globalist*. The culturalist tradition is characteristic of perspectives in the humanities; the developmentalist and globalist traditions are more emblematic of approaches in the social sciences; the deconstructionist tradition straddles both.

African studies was originally the province almost exclusively of anthropology, the premier colonial science, which, through its structuralist-functional paradigms and ethnographic present, froze African societies in static “tribalized” enclaves. Banished from much of the postcolonial academy with the advent of decolonization, anthropology was accused of exonerating colonialism of the cultural, cartographic, and cognitive violence it wreaked on Africa. The discipline entered into a period of deep epistemic, ethical, and political crisis as it tried to rescue itself from its discredited colonial complicity. It has yet fully to recover.

Elsewhere in the global North, as the discipline slowly renewed itself, anthropology became more historical, more global, and more reflexive, so that even if the ethnographic method retained its foundational supremacy

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for the discipline, and the romance with the “local” persisted, African cultures were increasingly expanded in scale, time, and connectedness to each other and to international cultural flows. In the process, African cultures lost some of their apparent timelessness, essentialism, and exoticism, and

Africans as groups and individuals could at last begin to escape from the suffocating confines of stable and static “traditional,” “kinship,” and “lineage” systems. Critics such as Archie Mafeje (*The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations*, 2002) have maintained that, while it is possible



**Kwaku,**  
*Waitin' in*  
*Vain.* 2006.  
Mixed media,  
34 x 34 inches

to deconstruct colonial anthropology, it is doubtful whether anthropology can be deracialized in its study of the “other,” and fully escape its racial, racializing, and racist past.

The culturalist tradition in African studies is, of course, not confined to anthropology as a discipline or to Eurocentric approaches. The vindicationist tradition of African diaspora scholars from the eighteenth century—who tried to vigorously defend the historicity of Africa and the humanity of Africans against the scientific racism emerging out of the hideous entrails of plantation slavery—rested on culturalist premises: that African cultures and societies were normal, not primitive aberrations; that they were civilizations, complex societies. The vindicationist tradition mutated into the nationalist tradition, most fully developed in nationalist historiography, which bloomed following decolonization and found its most auspicious home in Africa’s new or old, decolonized universities. African history ceased to be taught as a story of lack and becoming—lacking and becoming Europe—and scholars painstakingly sought to unravel African activities, adaptations, choices, and initiatives. While nationalist historiography was more enamored of political than of cultural history as such, its civilizational

argument against Europe—against colonialism—was fundamentally a cultural one. This Afrocentric analytical impulse exercised a powerful influence on African and Africanist scholarship, inspiring a whole range of disciplinary studies, from African languages and literatures to religions and philosophies. This impulse finds expression in contemporary South Africa in the indigenous knowledge systems movement.

The culturalist tradition found a worthy competitor in developmentalism, which emerged after World War II from a conjunction of several forces. There were the nationalists who prayed at the altar of development—for nationalism was, in part, a struggle for development, for the material advancement of African societies, for improved standards of living. The language of development was also used by the African political class to mobilize the impoverished and restive masses. For the beleaguered colonial powers, development served as a handy substitute for the tattered rhetoric of civilization discredited by the horrendous barbarism of World War II, and as a plea against nationalist charges of colonial exploitation. In the meantime, the discovery and problematization of poverty and backwardness in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—collectivized into the “Third World” in the 1950s—turned development into a global industry overseen by newly created international financial institutions, agencies, and civil society organizations.

Developmentalism became a powerful paradigm in African universities across the continent and in African studies programs abroad, as disciplines ranging from sociology to political science and economics, the “queen” of the social sciences, devised ever more sophisticated and prescriptive models to examine African societies, polities, and economies, and to engineer their modernization. With African and Africanist sociologists came a succession of conceptual and methodological approaches, ranging from the “acculturation” and “modernization” theses of the pluralists to the materialist and class concerns of the Marxists.

The will-to-knowledge and the will-to-power were locked in a fateful paradigmatic and prescriptive embrace in political science, which wrestled with two fundamental questions: how to construct coherent political communities within the territorial contrivances inherited from colonialism (nation-building) and how to build institutions and technologies for effective governance over the newly forged political communities (state-building). In the 1960s, much of the discourse was guided by the evolutionary hopes of modernization theory. By the 1980s, however, the postcolonial state had fallen from grace, and Africanist political scientists began to recast African politics and states as “crisis-ridden,” while competing to coin the most gratuitous epithets for the postcolonial leviathan. The gloom of Afropessimism

**The World Bank began to generously fund African university economics departments and consortia that concerned themselves with the intricacies of the neoliberal gospel.**

was most pronounced in the Africanist centers of the global North, but it found powerful echoes among some of Africa's own dispirited academics, although many others took strong umbrage to this discourse.

In the meantime, development economics emerged out of neoclassical economics, inheriting its parent's veneration for the "invisible hand" of the market, a belief in the two commandments of perfect competition and perfect rationality, an indifference to the classical concerns of growth and distribution, and a fondness for dualities. Africa and the "Third World" proved a fertile source of dualities: "modern-traditional" societies, "market-subsistence" economies, and "formal-informal" sectors. Marxist economics briefly won adherents in revolutionary states seeking to substitute underdeveloped capitalism with doctrinaire socialism. Also attractive in intellectual circles and the circuits of Third World solidarity and summitry was dependency theory, which emphasized external constraints to development and saw salvation in the vague ideology of self-reliance, with rhetorical agitation for a new international economic order. Both tendencies perished with the collapse of socialism in the 1980s and early 1990s, presaged by the resurgence of the uncompromising tenets of neoliberalism, of market fundamentalism. Before long, development economics largely disappeared from the discipline of economics. The World Bank, seeking to produce a new generation of pliant African economists, began to generously fund African university economics departments and consortia that concerned themselves with the intricacies of the neoliberal gospel.

The culturalist and developmentalist traditions had enjoyed competing and shifting hegemonies in African universities and African studies for many decades. From the turn of the 1970s, however, counterhegemonic insurgencies arose, first centered around radical Marxist and feminist paradigms, and later by the interventions of the more ambiguous "posts": poststructuralism, postmodernism, and, above all, postcolonialism. Collectively, these paradigms constitute what I call the *deconstructionist tradition*, by which I mean to capture the efforts that emerged within African studies to deconstruct prevailing and dominant analyses associated with the culturalist and developmentalist traditions. In a way, of course, postcolonial African studies as a whole, both within and outside the continent, has been deconstructionist, insofar as it has sought to dismantle the Eurocentric epistemic hegemonies that have dominated the study of Africa.

The rise of these deconstructionist conceptual systems can be attributed—as all paradigm shifts can—to changing and complexly interconnected intellectual, institutional, and ideological contexts, both within and outside the academy. The popularity of Marxist analysis in many African institutions and in African studies program abroad grew alongside disenchantment with the

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limited fruits of the “first independence,” and as greater faith was placed in the transformational potential of the radical liberation movements in southern Africa. In the world at large, this was a period of radical politics—from the universities to the United Nations—as previously disaffected constituencies, both students and developing countries, sought to remake the existing institutional and international orders. Marxism brought class analysis to African studies, which demolished the endearing and enduring myths of nationalist historiography and scholarship around a classless, communalistic Africa. Marxism also brought historical and structural analyses of African political economies from the stylized models and dualisms of modernization theories in development economics, political science, and sociology.

The women’s movement exploded on the academic and political scene as women demanded greater gender equity—in both parliamentary and paradigmatic representation—for economic and epistemological empowerment. Ironically, the failures of developmentalism, especially rural development, provided a critical impetus to the women’s movement in Africa, giving rise to the Women in Development (WID) project, which subsequently mutated into Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD). The women’s development project, together with more radical feminist perspectives, including African critiques of white, Western academic feminism, provided a fertile ground for feminist scholarly production. Feminism exposed the underlying androcentric biases of all major disciplinary and theoretical narratives, including Marxism. Feminist scholars embarked on a vigorous mission to incorporate women’s studies in and to genderize African studies.

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THE 1980S USHERED in a new moment in intellectual and international politics and the global economic order. In Euroamerica, there was a sharp turn to the right following the rise to power of conservative governments in the

**Postcolonialism has stressed the importance of reverse flows, and of bidirectional flows.**

major countries, beginning with Thatcher’s Britain, Reagan’s America, Mulroney’s Canada, and Kohl’s Germany. In the meantime, the Soviet Union and its allies accelerated toward implosion, and China rediscovered the virtues of capitalism. Global systemic options narrowed as neoliberalism assumed ascendancy. And our beloved Africa, battered by declining economic growth rates and SAPs, basically lost the 1980s and 1990s, engulfed as it was by the convulsions of struggles for the “second independence.” It was an inauspicious time for radical ideologies such as revolutionary feminism, Marxism, and dependency theories, which all but perished in the collapse of socialism in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The various “posts” emerged in this context, including postcolonialism, which has been particularly attractive to literary scholars, recovering anthropologists, and qualitative sociologists. It has given greater succor among Africanists in the global North than in Africa and, within Africa itself, more among Francophone and South African scholars than elsewhere on the continent. Postcolonialism has helped to open up and refine important themes, topics, and trends that were previously ignored or undertheorized. In African historical studies, for example, it has recast the nature of metropolitan-colonial connections. Whereas, before, the tendency was to see a unidirectional metropolitan-colonial connection emphasizing the flow of ideas, influences, institutions, and even individuals from the metropole to the colony, postcolonialism has stressed the importance of reverse flows, and of bidirectional flows. After all, the “metropole” was itself as much a creation of the imperial project as were the colonies. Europe and Africa, whiteness and blackness, were mutually constituted.

We are now much more aware of the role of colonial discourse as an incarnation and instrument of power. We better understand the discursive processes through which ideas and images of the colonized and colonizer were created, how the very notion of “Africa” was invented—as Mudimbe has demonstrated in his magisterial tomes, *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994)—through the conceptual registers of the new academic disciplines and the disciplining ideologies of missionary Christianity and the institutions of colonial education. We see how hierarchies of difference and African alterity were produced and reproduced through the temporal, spatial, and social teleologies and epistemic violence of Eurocentric history, geography, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy. We see now how power was located, acted out, and fought over in specific institutions and contexts by various social groups and projects.

Postcolonial analyses of the dynamics of reproduction have also generated important insights into the social reproduction of the colonial order, enriching Marxism-inspired studies on labor reproduction and feminist research on women’s productive and reproductive roles in colonial society (revealing that women subsidize migrant labor and the colonial economy as a whole, despite their marginalization). Studies of what can be called “intimate colonialism” have sharpened the focus on sexuality, the shifting constructions of gender and racial identities, and colonial representations of African sexuality, the control of which was central to ideologies of colonial domination. Postcolonial studies have looked at how different masculinities—dominant and hegemonic, subordinate and subversive—were produced and performed in different class, racial, institutional, and spatial contexts, and how they changed over time.

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Studies of anticolonial resistance—previously preoccupied with social content and composition and the continuities and discontinuities marked by decolonization—have also been reconfigured. By the 1980s, the old accounts of elite politics and heroic resistance had largely been abandoned in favor of analyses of resistance by peasants, workers, and women. Since 1990, more attention has been paid to everyday forms of resistance and the discourses among the various subaltern groups, including the youth. Some historians embraced the perspectives of the Indian Subaltern Studies group and their notion of “alternative nationalisms” among peasants, which took seriously peasant action and intellectual production.

Despite these contributions, many African scholars, particularly those at African universities, harbor deep misgivings about postcolonialism. They caution against the abandonment of categories that were critical to earlier analytical and revolutionary discourses—especially *nation* and *class*, and the mischievous celebration of hybridity and borderlands—which encourage the sanitization and depiction of imperialism and colonialism as “shared” cultures,

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negotiated discursive spaces. Valorization of colonial ambivalence and hybridity ignores the fact that colonialism was a space and moment that entailed not only negotiations, but also negations. The specificities of African subjectification and the persistent imaginings of national liberation were, and continue to be, written in pain and suffering, sweat and blood. The multiplication of identities, memories, and resistances surely must not be used to forget the larger contexts: the hierarchies of power between the colonizer and the colonized, Europe and Africa; the unequal impact the empire had and left behind for the metropolises and the colonies; the fact that imperial power was upheld by physical force (not simply by ideas and images); and that it was underpinned by material structures (not simply ideological constructs), and by political economy (not simply discursive economy).

The erasures of revolution, nation, class, history, and reality, even if they may have started as critiques, turn the “posts” into legitimating ideologies of contemporary global configurations of power and production. Insofar as capitalism is not as fragmented as it is often assumed to be, the “posts” bolster the capitalist order itself by becoming a part of the ideological apparatus that sustains the inability of exploited nations and social classes—splintered in their various cultural identities—to mobilize counterhegemonically. The analytical power of postcolonial theory will remain limited unless it tempers its facile celebration of newness, cosmopolitanism, and globalization in a world reeling from endless war and deepening inequalities, and places its favorite tropes of disjuncture and disorder in the context of the enhanced regulatory power of contemporary global capitalism. It must reconnect culture to political economy, pay attention to both localized or



**Kwaku,  
Wawa Aba  
(Perseverance).**  
2006. Mixed  
media, 53 x  
75 inches

microstruggles and broad anti-imperialist struggles, and consider how capitalist adjustments are reinstating and restructuring gender identities. Postcolonial theory must restore focus on nationalism, because the nation-state constitutes the site through which hegemonic capitalism operates and against which resistance can be organized.

The globalist tradition is rooted in Eurocentrism, which is inherently comparative and universalistic in its intellectual gaze and ambitions. Since the establishment of the modern academy in Europe, African phenomena have always been measured according to European master references—from humanity to history, civilization to culture, ethics to economics, temporalities to technologies, sociality to sexuality—and always found lacking, lagging behind Europe. But the African response, too, even in its militant Afrocentric forms, has largely consisted of investing Africa with the imagined positive attributes of Europe, rather than dismantling the very foundations of this colonizing epistemological order. Can African studies escape—even transcend—the Eurocentric coding, the seductions and sanctions of writing Africa by analogy?

In globalization discourses Africa is sometimes, strangely enough, seen as marginal to globalization, when it has in fact been central to the construction of the modern world, with all its ramifications—economic, political, cultural, and discursive—over the half-millennium since the emergence of the Atlantic world system. As Samir Amin has forcefully argued, Africa's so-called marginalization—on the one hand, the continent, or much of it, is out of the global system or integrated into it only superficially; on the

other, the poverty of African peoples is precisely the result of their not being sufficiently integrated into the global system—is not borne out by the facts. Stripped of globaloney, globalization is both an ideological project of neo-liberal capitalist restructuring and a long-term historical process of interconnectedness. African scholars have not contributed much to such globalization literature and debates. More productive, in my view, has been the globalist tradition arising out of diaspora studies.

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THE GROWTH OF African interest in the diaspora is partly fueled by the rising emigration of highly educated Africans to the global North. For example, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, among African-born U.S. residents aged twenty-five years and above, 49.3 percent had a bachelor's degree or more, as compared to 25.6 percent for the native-born population and 25.8 percent for the foreign-born population as a whole. The new diaspora is coveted by African governments for its social capital—skills, knowledge, networks, civic awareness, cultural experience, and cosmopolitanism—that can not only provide access to global markets and investment but also stimulate technological innovation. The new diaspora is also Africa's biggest donor—according to World Bank estimates, in 2006, the new diaspora remitted \$39 billion; other estimates are as large as \$150 billion. Not surprisingly, governments increasingly regard the diaspora as a critical remittance pipeline, an important economic asset.

The African diaspora studies movement represents a return to the future of the Pan-Africanist scholarship of Edward Blyden and W. E. B. Du Bois,

**Eurocentrism seeks to universalize the West and provincialize the rest.**

who always tried to understand and situate Africa into worldly representation and recognition, to affirm an African presence that was both unique and equal to others. Diaspora studies offer a key avenue for globalizing African history and contesting European appropriations of global history, enabling us to rewrite the histories of the various regions to which Africans were dispersed, whether voluntarily or by force. The Africans who conquered and ruled parts of the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492 CE, establishing what the Moroccan scholar Anouar Majid calls an “African kingdom in Europe,” did so voluntarily, while those who were shipped to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade were coerced. Both left an indelible mark on the history of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, whose effects are still with us and are central to understanding the history of the Atlantic world. The same is true of the Indian Ocean world, whose history cannot be fully grasped without the imprint of African activities, migrations, and diasporas. Conversely, the European and Asian diasporas to Africa, and the contemporary Afro-

European and Afro-Asian diasporas from Africa, are simultaneously part of African and world histories. Eurocentrism seeks to universalize the West and provincialize the rest, but diaspora studies subvert that imperial self-fashioning and give Africans global historical agency. Interest in diaspora studies among Africanists and African scholars on the continent is growing, which offers the possibility of integrating the various institutional, ideological, and intellectual tendencies of African studies into productive engagement, and the ASA now regularly features themes and topics on the subject. African studies today is a house of many mansions, a field with diverse, complex, and fascinating disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global dimensions. The days when one country, one center—or one paradigm, for that matter—dominated African studies are long gone. For some, this apparent fragmentation is a source of deep concern; for others, it represents scholarly pluralization and a cause for celebration.

Only when universities on the continent fully recover and take their rightful—and leading—role in the production of African scholarly knowledges will African studies in the rest of the world become a truly strong field. From the late 1990s on, African leaders, educators, researchers, and external donors became increasingly aware of the challenges facing African higher education, and the need for renewal, if the continent was to achieve higher rates of growth and development and compete in an increasingly knowledge-intensive global economy. The reform agenda has centered on five broad sets of issues, although expressions of concern have yet to be matched by the provision of adequate resources. First, the need to examine systematically the philosophical foundations of African universities is widely recognized. Included in this are the principles underpinning public higher education in an era of privatization: the conception, content, and consequences of the reforms currently being undertaken across the continent, and the public-private interface in African higher education systems. Second, African universities are grappling with the challenges of quality control, funding, and governance in response to the establishment of new regulatory regimes; growing pressures for finding alternative sources of funding; changing demographics and massification; increasing demands for access and equity for underrepresented groups, including women; and the emergence of new forms of student and faculty politics in the face of the democratization of the wider society.

There are also pedagogical and paradigmatic issues, ranging from the languages of instruction in African universities and other educational systems as a whole to the dynamics of knowledge production—the societal

**Critical for Africa is the changing role of external donors, from the philanthropic foundations to the World Bank and other international financial institutions and multilateral agencies.**

relevance of the knowledges produced in African higher education systems and how those knowledges are disseminated and consumed by students, scholarly communities, and the general public.

Another aspect of the reform agenda focuses on the role of universities in the pursuit of the historic project of Africa nationalism: decolonization, development, democratization, nation-building, and regional integration are all under scrutiny. Included here are questions of the uneven and changing relations between universities and the state, civil society, and industry, as well as the role of universities in helping to manage and resolve the various crises that confront the African continent, from civil conflicts to disease epidemics, most notably HIV/AIDS. The role that universities have played and can play in the future to either promote or undermine the pan-African project is also of great interest, as African states, *via* the African Union, renew their efforts to achieve closer integration both within Africa and between Africa and its diasporas.

The new reform agenda also examines the impact of global trends associated with new information and communication technologies, expansion of the transborder or transnational provision of higher education, and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) regime. Critical for Africa is the changing role of external donors, from the philanthropic foundations to the World Bank and other international financial institutions and multilateral agencies. The impact of these trends on African higher education, and *vice versa*, are of utmost importance and will benefit from fruitful collaboration between researchers from Africa and other world regions.

The challenges facing African universities are serious and disquieting, but higher education in Africa has a long history, dating back to ancient Christian and Islamic institutions of higher learning, and it will have a long future. The onus for ensuring that such a future is a healthy and productive one lies primarily with African leaders, educators, and scholars, who cannot afford the morbid indulgences of Afropessimism, which has so often afflicted Africanists outside the continent. Productive engagement with African institutions and principled commitment to critical and empowering scholarship can provide a useful antidote and help to advance the long-standing agendas of African universities for their own epistemic and institutional decolonization, along with those of African studies everywhere.🌐

## Kwaku Ofori-Yirenkyi

Kwaku Ofori-Yirenkyi—also known as *Absku*—describes his art as “a search for a personal and social identity.” Kwaku, who was born in Ghana, has lived in the United States since the age of twelve—now more than half of his life. His work ranges over various styles and media, and reflects influences from both his first and second cultures; through immersion and assimilation of the two cultures, a “third” culture is created, which Kwaku describes as “the transformation that an individual goes through when uprooted from the original homeland, the first culture.” Kwaku thus bridges his first and second cultures through his work as an artist.

In his diaspora representations, Kwaku uses symbols from Adinkra, a traditional language of Ghanaian origin. The word *Adinkra* means *saying goodbye when parting ways*. These symbols—based on nonfigurative shapes, plant life, human-made objects, the human body, and animals—remind people of proverbs and ideas about life. Kwaku uses the symbols playfully, allowing his paintings to take on their own identities as graphic statements of the many realities and identities in life.

*I am aware of the plurality of my cultural influences. This awareness increases my interest in expressing that duality in my artwork. I consider my work as an impression and expression of traditional Ghanaian and contemporary Western cultural influences. My work explores the multitudes of identities that result from migration as part of the African diaspora.*

—Kwaku Ofori-Yirenki