

African Studies in Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea

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Opening Address delivered to the Second Annual African Studies Conference
African Studies Association of Australia
Canberra
15-16 November 1979

'African Studies in Australia'

Thomas Spear.

When I first arrived in Australia seven years ago, after having some difficulty obtaining a visa, I was asked by the immigration officer in Brisbane what I did.

'Teach,' I replied, trying to avoid controversy.

'What do you teach?' he queried.

'History,' I said, still equivocating.

'What sort of history?' he asked.

'African history," I replied nervously, feeling the game might be up.

'You're a rare bird,' he shot back, loudly stamping my passport.

We've come a long way in those seven years to this, the second annual conference of the African Studies Association of Australia. One no longer feels quite so rare, particularly when we can gather together like this and convince one another that Africa really is at the centre of the universe! Perhaps that is a just reward for having remained in the academic wilderness so long, but we still have a way to go before Africa assumes the place it deserves in Australian university life, business activity and public consciousness.

Just 5 years ago David Goldsworthy of Monash and Richard Higgott, then at Tasmania, both conducted surveys of Africanists and African Studies in Australia. The results: 16 courses about Africa were then being taught in Australian universities, while 22 academics reported a research interest in Africa.¹ Today, the Directory of

1. R. Higgott, 'African Studies in Australia, 1974/75,' Politics, 10 (1975), 88-91; D. Goldsworthy, 'The Study of African History and Politics in Australia,' Journal of Modern African Studies, 13(1975), 148-152.

the African Studies Association lists some 51 courses with substantial African content and 86 academics with an interest in Africa in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.² We have moved forward, but the majority of universities still do not offer a single course concerning Africa and none offer a broadly-based area of studies. No African Studies Centre or Institute exists. Rare indeed is an African course in a College of Advanced Education. And I doubt if Africa is ever mentioned in most high schools. Is it any wonder that Australians know so little about this area of the world, and then only when the tensions inherent in poor, newly-independent nations or white minority states explode onto the front pages of our newspapers with riots, guerilla warfare, or the brutal excesses of an Emperor Bokassa or 'President-for-Life' Idi Amin Dada?

One might well ask what relevance these poor and underdeveloped states half-way around the world have for Australia that we should seek a more empathetic understanding of their problems. After all, Australian involvement with them is minimal at best; the nearest most Australians get to Africa is 40,000 feet above it on the way to Europe. No Australian airline even stops there. But such a reaction is a narrow and short-sighted view. In a time of increasing communications and declining resources and of world-wide economic

2. Directory of Africanists in Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, African Studies Association of Australia, 1979. The Directory will be updated periodically in the AFSAA Newsletter.

malaise all the people of the world are increasingly forced to face the future together. The potential conflicts between north and south, rich and poor, black and white threaten us all. Australia, increasingly becoming underdeveloped and dependent on mineral exports, has natural allies among the other resource suppliers in the third world, many of whom in Africa are also our brothers in the Commonwealth. It is gratifying to us that our last two Prime Ministers have taken an increased interest in African affairs, most recently at Lusaka and in the current negotiations concerning independence for Zimbabwe. But it should not strike us as surprising after seeing how quickly the present British government's commitment to white Rhodesians was modified following Nigeria's forceful reminder in nationalizing British oil companies that Black Africa is now a greater economic force than the white ruled south.

Our conference opens with surveys of Australia's and New Zealand's relations with Africa, so I will leave detailed consideration of these to the opening speakers. But I would like to point to some other areas where increasing knowledge about Africa is relevant to Australians, New Zealanders, Papua New Guineans, and people of the Pacific islands.

The majority of African states today gained their independence early in the 1960s and have already experienced a generation of independence from colonial rule. By contrast, many of our near neighbours in the Pacific have only recently gained their independence or have yet to do so. Can the African experience help us to understand the problems of our own region? I think so. Papua New Guinea

has already called on a number of African advisors, and the by now familiar problems to Africanists of alien and fragile institutions and of underdevelopment are already beginning to emerge. Lest the Bokassa's and Amin's dominate the stage, casting a pessimistic pall over the prospects for Pacific nations, it is well to remember countries like Tanzania, Kenya, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast, which have enjoyed fairly peaceful transitions to independence, while others like Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, and Mozambique are emerging as stable and dynamic states. Even this small sample of African countries offers a broad range of political, social, and economic options for other developing countries to study and learn from.

The serious study of Africa and its enormous variety of peoples also stems from independence in the early 1960s. In the short time since then we have begun to develop sophisticated methods for studying societies and problems heretofore largely ignored in the West, including the politics of developing countries, processes of underdevelopment, the histories of small-scale, preliterate societies, and the problems of tropical agriculture and pastoralism, to name but a few. All of these methodologies can also be applied to problems closer to home. In my department at La Trobe, for example, we teach African history together with Pacific history, Aboriginal history and prehistory, facilitating the rapid transfer of methodologies and insights from one area to the others. We have also had considerable interaction with the historians of pre-industrial Europe, who have been able to observe first hand the problems rural oral cultures face in the transition to industrial literate ones, and one of the

most important recent books in European history tracing this transition-Keith Thomas' Religion and the Decline of Magic - is based on comparative African materials. Thus an understanding of Africa and Africans can and is also facilitating our understanding of ourselves.

We in the African Studies Association have been trying to develop African Studies in Australia for just these reasons. Our first problem has been to identify and bring together Africanists from throughout Australia. Last year we held our initial conference at La Trobe and decided at that time to form an association. For the past year, the officers of the Association have been working to get it established, building the membership, issuing our Newsletter and a Directory of Africanists, and planning this year's conference. In the process, Africanists from New Zealand and Papua New Guinea have joined with us and we hope to extend the Association formally to include them at our annual general meeting tonight. This is just the beginning.

In the coming year we hope to extend our activities to include making more use of the media, seeking to arrange exchanges for research and teaching with African universities to add to the number of members already teaching and conducting research in Africa as well as to bring African scholars here, drawing up resource guides for teaching African studies in secondary schools and CAEs, and generally promoting a wider understanding of Africa in Australia.³

3. For further information of the activities of the Association, contact the Secretary, C/- Department of History, La Trobe University, Bundoora 3083.

This last aim has been uppermost in our minds in planning this conference. Jointly sponsored by the Association and the Centre for Continuing Education of the Australian National University, we hope the conference will promote an interchange between academics and others interested in Africa concerning some of the issues facing Africa today. Our first session, designed to help transport us from Canberra to Africa, concerns Australia's and New Zealand's relations with Africa. That session will begin in just a few minutes.

The remaining sessions of the conference, this afternoon and tomorrow, will each be broken into three sections, to run concurrently, each pursuing one of the three sub-themes of the conference. Section A in each session will discuss political issues of contemporary Africa. This afternoon this section will discuss demography and settlement, tomorrow morning civilian and military rule, and tomorrow afternoon critics of Britain's colonial empire. Section B in each session will discuss economic issues, commencing with ethnicity and class this afternoon, development strategies at the local level, and dependency and decolonization tomorrow. Finally, Section C (and Section D in the last session) will discuss issues relating to southern Africa, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.

This evening we will also have the conference dinner, starting at 6.00 here in Burgman College. The speaker will be the Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University and the President of the African Studies Association of Australia, Professor Anthony Low. After dinner, the Association will conduct its annual general meeting, and all members are encouraged to attend.

In closing, I would like to welcome all of you to the conference and hope that you find it informative, stimulating, and rewarding. We have endeavoured to keep the papers short and the time available for discussion in each session long to enable all that want to to participate. On behalf of the Association I would also like to express our thanks to the Centre for Continuing Education and to Brendan O'Dwyer for making the local arrangements and hosting us here at the ANU.

